

THE Atlantic

SEPTEMBER 2001

MONTHLY

THE GREAT COLLEGE HUSTLE

How elite schools and privileged students play the early-decision admissions game
by James Fallows

PLUS: Confessions of a prep school college counselor
by Caitlin Flanagan

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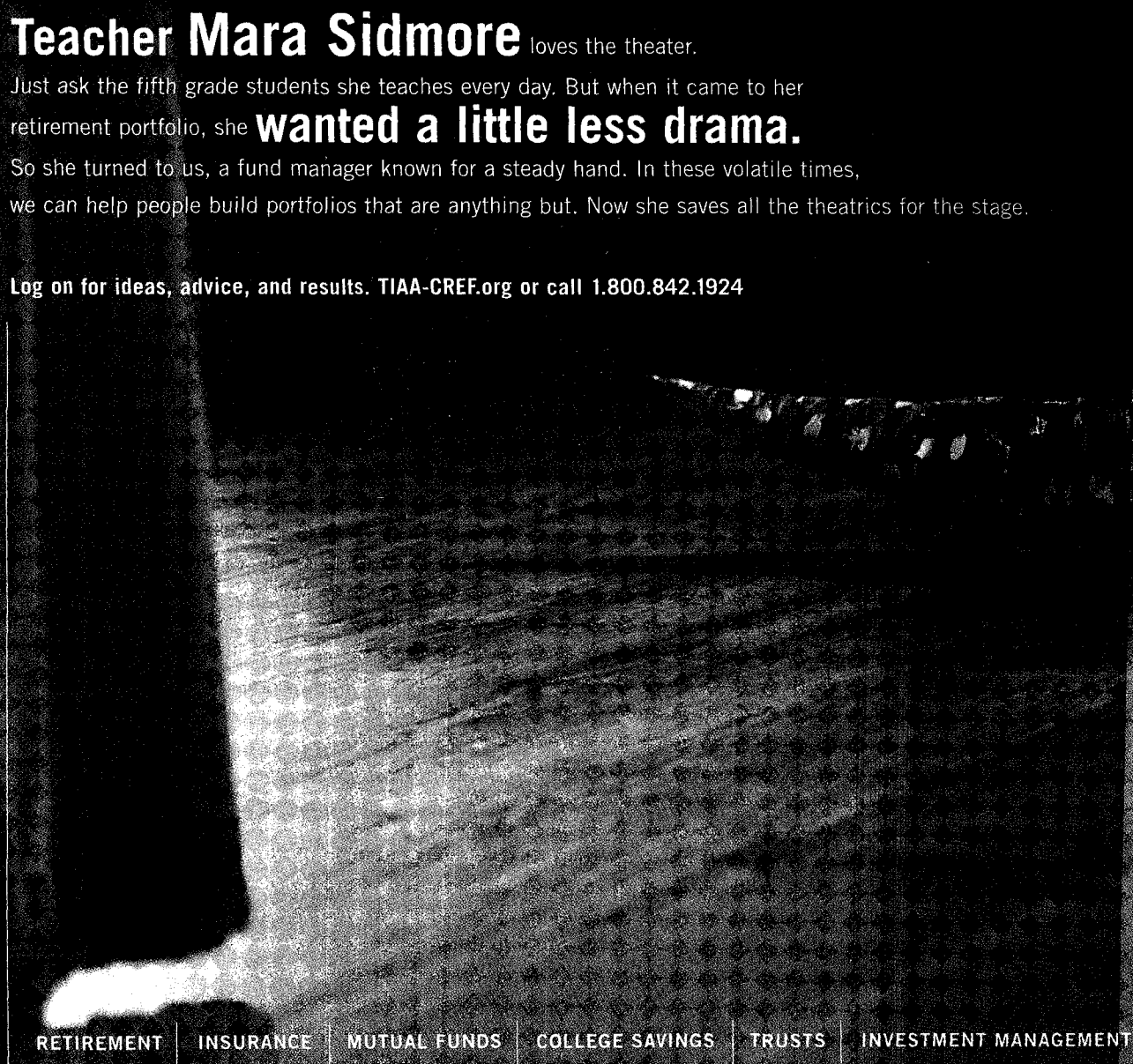
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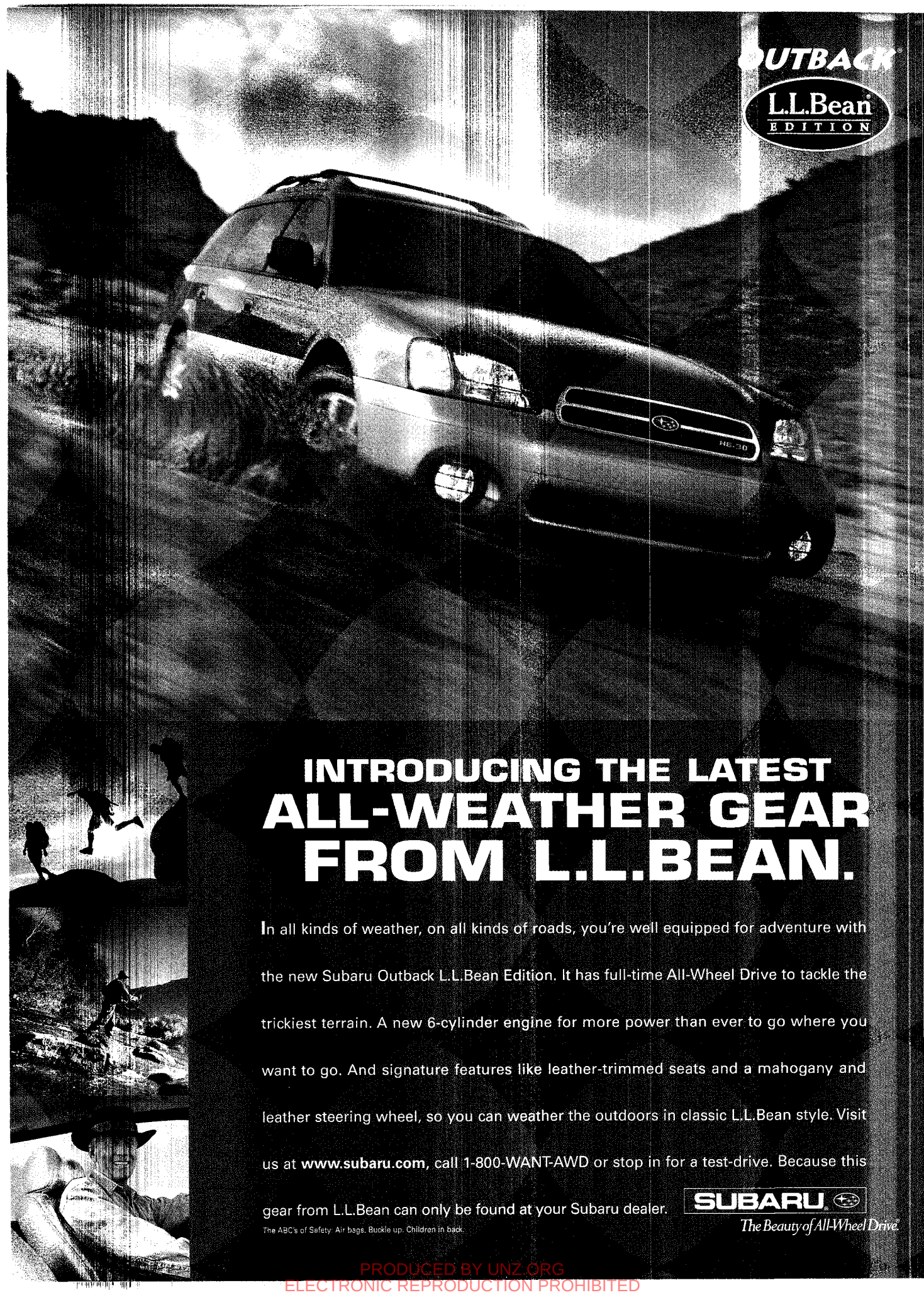
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77 NORTH WASHINGTON STREET

For some time Samantha Power has been, as a war correspondent and as a human-rights lawyer, professionally thinking about murder on a mass scale. The past century has been a rich one for this particular field of inquiry: Hitler's Final Solution, Stalin's purges and forced famines, Pol Pot's re-education of Cambodia. A few years ago Power focused her thinking on one question that arises out of genocide—not why do such great evils happen but why are they *allowed* to happen? Why do decent people and decent governments, again and again, stand by and let the killers kill? Why does “Never again” so often turn into “Well, just this one last time”?

In writing a book to answer this question, Power has analyzed U.S. responses to the major genocides of the twentieth century—including the murder, in 1994, of some 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu by soldiers and volunteer civilian butchers controlled by the Hutu government in the African nation of Rwanda. The Rwandan massacre especially lent itself to journalistic analysis. It had occurred recently, so memories were relatively fresh and sources were numerous. The critical role in blocking an effective response to the genocide had been played by the United States; the decision-makers and many of the documents recording their decision-making turned out to be accessible (albeit only after dogged effort). Moreover, the circumstances of the Rwandan genocide particularly fit Power's question, because standing idly by had clearly not been the only option there.

Nevertheless, U.S. policymakers chose not to act. One of their rationalizations was that they were powerless. But the massacre that spread across three months in the spring and summer of 1994 was the work of government militia and barely trained amateurs. A serious intervention by Western troops—numerous, heavily armed, and prepared to kill—certainly could have stopped the slaughter.

Another rationalization—an old standby among bystanders—was that the goal attainable through intervention simply wasn't worth the price. In many cases this is legitimate. Cuba has been a dictatorship for forty-two years, and the violations of human rights there are many and varied. But nothing short of invasion (and we tried that, sort of) seems likely to affect matters. The suffering of the people of Cuba, and the violation of values of which the United States is the (frequently announced) defender, do not rise to a level of

horror sufficient to justify the costs of war with Cuba. Again, though, this rationalization is unpersuasive in the case of Rwanda, where the price of intervention was low and the humanitarian goal of intervention was of the highest order: to stop ongoing genocide. If that was not worthy enough, then no human-rights goal can be worthy enough; and intervention in the affairs of other nations becomes worthwhile only when absolutely necessary to protect American interests.

The third rationalization for Rwanda—and this, too, is a historical favorite—was that we just didn't know. President Clinton suggested this in his disingenuous “apology” to the Tutsi of Rwanda four years after his Administration had blocked efforts to rescue them. Revisionist apologists for the United States make this argument still. But as Power shows, it is not true. U.S. policymakers may not have known

everything (in part because they assiduously worked to deny or to minimize what they did know), but they certainly knew enough, soon enough, to save hundreds of thousands of lives.

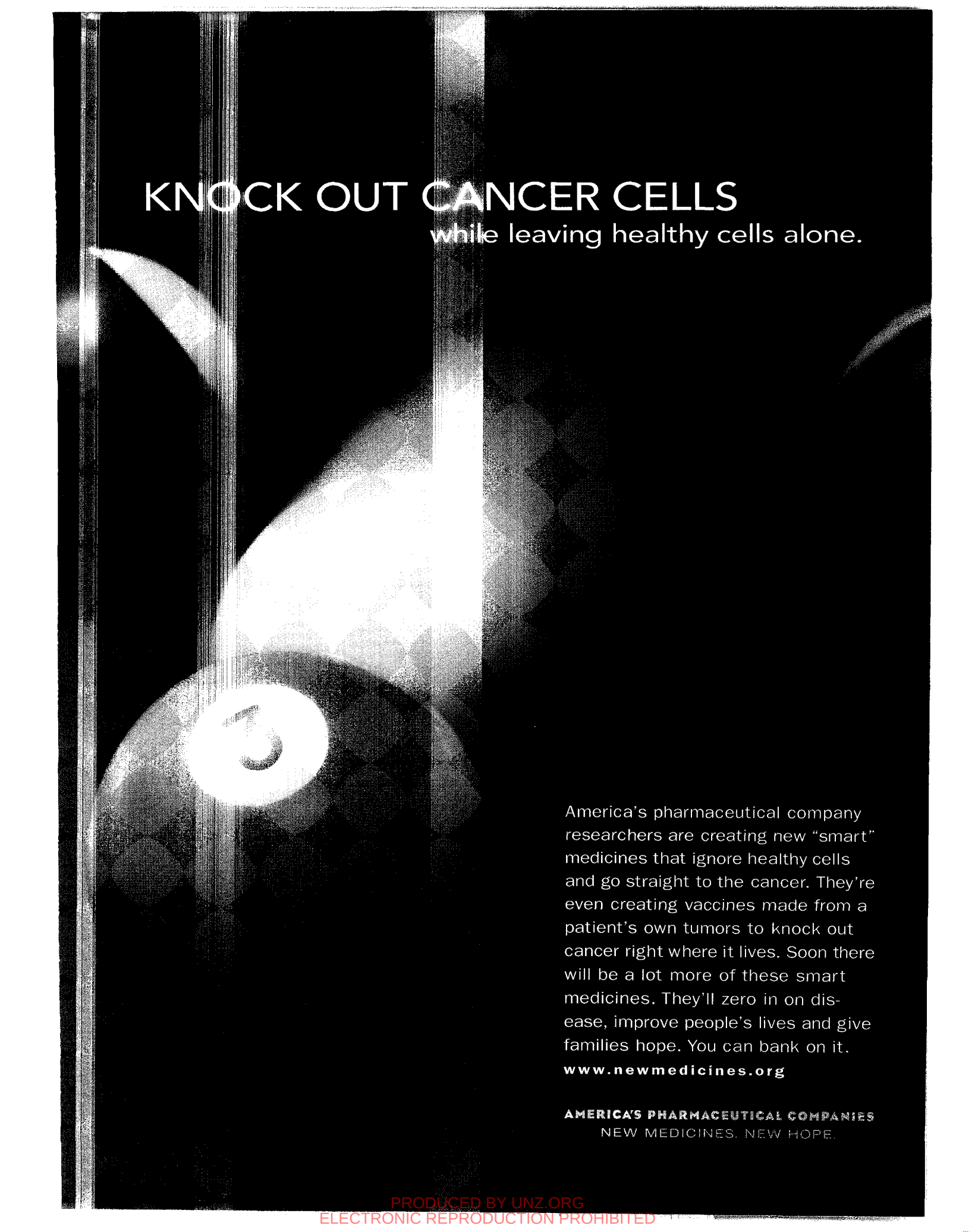
Finally, Rwanda makes for an especially interesting study of Power's question because the genocide there occurred in an era when conditions were optimal for humanitarian intervention. The end of the Cold War meant that neither the UN nor the United States needed to worry about the old geopolitical

risks. The executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government were controlled by a party publicly committed to human-rights concerns. The Administration's foreign-policy thinkers believed they had developed a human-rights philosophy flexible enough to work: Intervene when necessary but also (and only) when practical and likely to be effective. And yet, when the killing occurred in Rwanda, nothing happened—or, rather, the usual thing happened. The killers killed, the victims begged, the bystanders stood by.

Power spent three years interviewing scores of the participants in the U.S. response to Rwanda, and she reviewed hundreds of pages of declassified documents pertaining to the response. The lessons she has unearthed apply not only to Rwanda and the Clinton Administration but to the larger question of genocide and bureaucratic response in general, and they are disturbing lessons. “What is most frightening about this story,” Power writes of the U.S. failure in Rwanda, “is that it testifies to a system that in effect worked.” —MICHAEL KELLY



Samantha Power



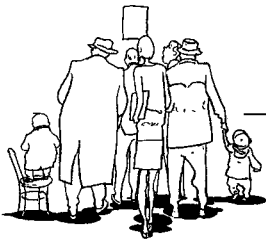
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IN THIS ISSUE

In the increasingly competitive contest for admission to the nation's most selective colleges, how much is applying "early decision" worth? About 100 SAT points, reports **James Fallows**, *The Atlantic's* national correspondent, in this month's cover story ("The Early-Decision Racket"). Fallows explores the enormous and problematic growth in the popularity of early-admissions programs, and why colleges, college counselors, and students themselves would benefit from getting rid of the programs altogether. Fallows's most recent book, *Free Flight: From Airline Hell to a New Age of Travel*, was published in June.

Caitlin Flanagan ("Confessions of a Prep School College Counselor") analyzes the upper-middle class's neurotic fixation on admissions to elite colleges and surveys the perennial crop of guides that feed the frenzy. Flanagan's article on the origins and the allure of tabloids appeared in the July/August issue.

Garrison Keillor ("Lake Wobegon Summer 1956") conjures the paradise lost of a Minnesota boyhood filled with baseball, family secrets, and tomatoes eaten warm off the vine. Keillor is the creator and host of the Minnesota Public Radio program *A Prairie Home Companion*. "Lake Wobegon Summer 1956" is drawn from his novel of the same name, to be published this month by Viking.

Postmortem accounts of the Clinton Administration's response to the genocide in Rwanda have characterized the Administration as either willfully complicit with evil or ignorant of a monumental and unstoppable calamity. Neither is accurate, writes **Samantha Power** ("By-standers to Genocide"). Power, who spent three years sifting through newly declas-

sified cables and interviewing White House, State Department, and Defense Department officials involved in crafting U.S. policy at the time, paints a vivid and disturbing picture of a risk-averse bureaucracy unprepared to confront a colossal crime. Power is the executive director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Her article in this issue is drawn from her forthcoming book, *A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, to be published next March by Basic/New Republic Books.

Beth Lordan ("Digging") is the director of the creative-writing program at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. She is the author of the short-story collection *And Both Shall Row* (1998). Her story "The Man With the Lapdog," which appeared in the February, 1999, *Atlantic*, received an O. Henry Award.

In Notes & Dispatches this month: **Michael Erard** reports from Toronto, on one man's crusade to clean up the closed-captioning industry; **Stephen Bodio** from Bombay, on the mysterious and troubling decline of India's most efficient garbage man, the vulture; the NASA administrator, **Daniel Goldin**, from Washington, D.C., on America's shrinking pool of experienced scientists; **Mark Schapiro** from Bogotá, on a mayor's dramatic attempts to revive civic spirit by turning his city into performance art; and **Jeff Spurrier** from Los Angeles, on a day-long SWAT-team siege next door.

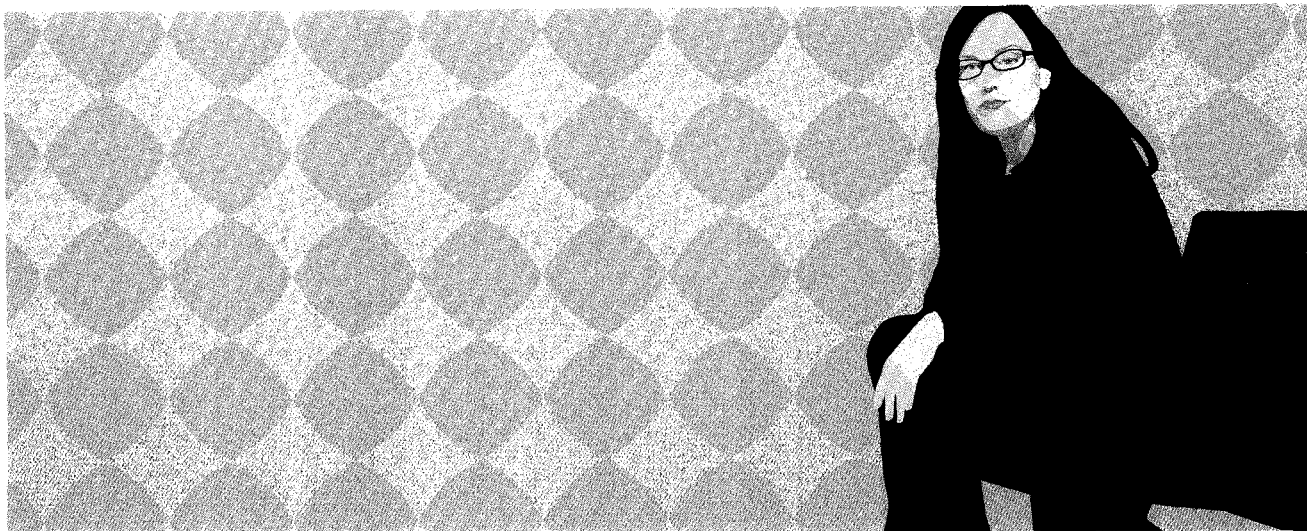
Andalusia, the heart of Islamic Spain, was once home to sultans and scientists alike. **Cullen Murphy** ("Tales of the Alhambra") explores the streets of Granada and Córdoba, cities with deep Muslim roots. Murphy is the managing editor of *The Atlantic*. He is at work on a book about the Inquisition.

This year will most likely answer a pressing question: Is the suit dead—or is it merely resting? **William Hamilton** ("Suitably Attired") comments on the peculiar endurance of one of modern fashion's very few constants. Hamilton draws cartoons for *The New Yorker* and *The New York Observer*, and has written five plays and four novels, including the forthcoming *Jerry Grew*.

Freshly dug heirloom potatoes, available at farmers' markets through next month, are ideal for making German potato salad, a surprisingly light, tangy, intensely flavored alternative to the mayonnaise-slathered salads often found at picnics. **Corby Kummer** ("Potato Salad") offers recipes and a plug for a largely misunderstood complement to the salad: salted herring. Kummer is a senior editor of *The Atlantic*.

For years American readers have been woefully unfamiliar with the novels of Dawn Powell, a writer whose contradictory blend of sincerity and cynicism defies easy categorization. **Philip Hensher** ("The Country and the City") reviews The Library of America's newly released two-volume edition of Powell's works. Hensher is the author of three novels, including *Kitchen Venom* (1996), which won the Somerset Maugham Award. His novel *The Mulberry Empire* will be published next year.

For the more than 200 years since the publication of his *Life of Johnson*, James Boswell has assured his subject a measure of literary immortality. Most readers, though, know comparatively little about Boswell himself. **Miranda Seymour** ("Bozzy's Life") reviews *Boswell's Presumptuous Task*, Adam Sisman's lively portrait of literature's most famous hanger-on. Seymour's biography of Mary Shelley will be published in the United States in September.



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From the Archive: Highlights from past September issues of *The Atlantic*, including Booker T. Washington's seminal essay "The Awakening of the Negro," published in 1896, and C. E. Norton's 1861 article "The Advantages of Defeat" on the Union Army's loss at the first Battle of Bull Run.

Post & Riposte: Join James Fallows this month in *Post & Riposte* to discuss his article "The Early Decision Racket."

Corby's Table: In a regular online column that won the 2001 James Beard Foundation Award for Internet Writing, *The Atlantic's* food critic reviews new books on food and cooking, and offers excerpts and selected recipes.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Russia Is Finished

Jeffrey Tayler ("Russia Is Finished," May *Atlantic*) would have us believe that the adoption of "suffocating" Orthodox Christianity and the invasion of the "cruel" Mongols are responsible for Russia's tradition of autocratic government. The chronology demonstrates that this is not so: Orthodoxy came to Russia in the tenth century, and the Mongols in the thirteenth, but nothing approaching autocracy appeared before the later fifteenth century.

In fact, Tayler's "Orthodoxy plus Asiatic hordes equals permanent tyranny" formula is a very old emanation of European Russophobia. In order to persuade the papacy to sanction a crusade against Moscow, anti-Russian propagandists of the sixteenth century argued that the Muscovites weren't Christians at all but, rather, "barbarous Orientals." The crusade was approved. This nasty piece of Western prejudice was passed down through the years until it appeared in Cold War "histories" of Russia, where Tayler doubtless found it. The authors of these books, in their own way, were also attempting to win approval for a crusade against the Russians. Happily, they failed.

Tayler also suggests that Russia's long isolation from Europe is the root of illiberal government. There is something to this, but not very much. Russia was relatively isolated from Europe, and thus was not deeply affected by liberalizing European currents. It was not, however, isolation from Europe that was the cause of despotism in Russia but, rather, harmful geopolitical interaction with Europe. From the sixteenth century to the present day Russian elites have perceived Europe as a serious strategic threat. And for good reason: European states have continually menaced, often invaded, and on several occasions laid waste to Russia.

Tayler is absolutely right to be

alarmed by the cruelty with which Russia's rulers have treated and continue to treat their people. But recourse to crude Orientalism or naive faith in European culture does not help us understand the historical origins and persistence of illiberal government in Russia. The ruthless behavior of the Russian ruling elite must be put in the proper historical context—that is, of a backward state attempting to survive in the predatory environment that was and is modern European history. By taking drastic measures, Russia succeeded where the vast majority failed. Now the Russians are paying the price for their success.

*Marshall Poe
Harvard University
Cambridge, Mass.*

Russia was mugged. Jeffrey Tayler's depressing account of the decline and fall of Russia suffers from a serious elision. Despite three twentieth-century invasions from the Christian capitalist West, which took more than 40 million Russian lives, and Stalin's paranoia, which, given the invasions and our Cold War rhetoric, may not have been all that paranoid, the Soviets were able to establish universal education and health care and cheaply house the population. Living standards in the USSR were closer to those in the West than at any time in history and probably any time in the future. Had Gorbachev been allowed to remove the excesses of communism, the future might have been even brighter. However, we cheered Yeltsin and his vulpine associates and helped to bring on the ruin. Something in the Russian character and history may be responsible, as Tayler suggests, but credit for the present must be shared with Churchill, Hitler, Reagan, and the other ideological foes of godless communism.

*Art Hilgart
Kalamazoo, Mich.*

Jeffrey Tayler's critique falters considerably in assuming that Russia's precipitate descent is irreversible; that it will result in marginalizing Russia to the extent that it becomes internationally obscure; and, not least, that the West can afford to ignore the trends of decay that currently infect Russia because its "decline into obscurity" is likely to be "relatively peaceful."

Historically the Russian state has displayed an almost miraculous capacity for national rejuvenation in the face of serious internal discord and calamitous external strife. Nowhere was this capacity more clearly demonstrated than in the post-World War II Soviet Union. Although the USSR suffered monstrous human casualties and the near complete destruction of its industrial infrastructure as a consequence of World War II, a mere five years after the cessation of hostilities the USSR had recovered to the extent that it could challenge the United States as a de facto, if not yet a de jure, equal.

*Tom Call
Norfolk, Va.*

Jeffrey Tayler's methodology and conclusions are dangerously misleading. First, as befits his Western upbringing, Tayler projects Western business norms into a setting that has absolutely no historical precedent for what we would refer to as ethical practices and standards of conduct. What we consider corruption and theft do not translate into exactly that in a Russian context. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union there has been no framework on which to build efficient market institutions. Russia has just had to bumble along and hope for the best. It is irrational to expect that Western capitalist standards would randomly sprout in this setting.

More disturbing is Tayler's description of Russia as "just another corrupt Third World country." This marginalizes



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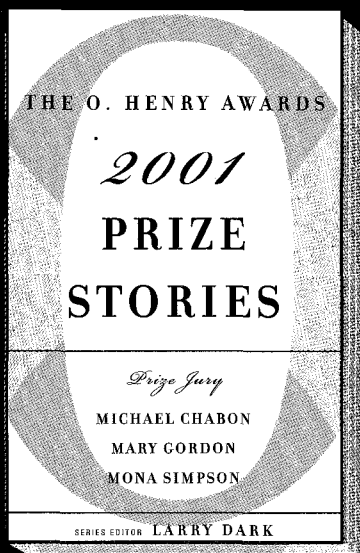
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great efforts on the part of Western institutions and the International Monetary Fund to create economic development and raise living standards in Russia. Potential achievements and prospects for improvement vanish if we adopt Tayler's fatalistic view of Russian development. Since the 1998 financial crisis growth in Russia has slowly resumed, and institutions are reforming. To dismiss that is, in effect, to dismiss the very hope that inspired the transition process to begin with.

Richard Lee
Providence, R.I.

I was saddened to see Jeffrey Tayler add to our misperceptions about Russia by repeating long-dismissed theories as to why that country is the way it is. Tayler essentially blames the current catastrophe on Eastern Christianity, the Byzantine Empire, and Asian Tatar hordes. Sadly, any undergraduate studying Russia or Byzantium knows that these old Western European "theories" have long been discarded. Byzantium was far from "moribund," Eastern Christianity was (and is) permeated by Hellenistic thought, and the Mongol yoke had far less impact on the Russian psyche. In fact, Russia, especially from Peter the Great on, looked to Western Europe, especially to the French and Prussian absolutist monarchies, to learn the lessons of state tyranny and despotism and how to crush independence in religion, the arts, and public thought. Remember, this is the Europe that brought us the Inquisition and the Third Reich. Lenin and Stalin did not need to look to Byzantium for their bloody autocracy—Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, and Engels were much closer.

David B. Cole
Portland, Oreg.

Jeffrey Tayler replies:

In reducing the historical portion of my article to the assertion that "Orthodoxy plus Asiatic hordes equals permanent tyranny," Marshall Poe fogs one of the clearest distinctions between Russian and Western European history: that the Schism and the Mongol invasion set Russia on an isolationist course that eventually prevented it from experiencing positive influence from the intellectual and cultural movements (the

Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment) that shaped the modern democratic West. To state this hardly smacks of "crude Orientalism." Whether or not it is fashionable in U.S. academic circles to say so, an awareness of the divide between Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Christianity permeates Russians' reactions to Westerners to this day, and Russians are not shy about pointing this out. The tribulations of the Mongol era (and subsequent invasions and calamities) prompt Russians to conclude that their lot has been a particularly grievous one that Westerners—including, apparently, Poe—fail to understand. And it is most certainly not "naïve" to grasp that life is better in the West, where ideals deriving from Western culture are dominant (if not realized), than it is in Russia—as the long lines of visa applicants outside the American and European embassies in Moscow attest. To argue otherwise leads us down the path of pointless academic relativism.

Poe comes close to apologizing for Russia's despotism in blaming it on hostile European-Russian interaction. Though such interaction was clearly a contributing factor in the rise of autocracy, it in no way gainsays the influence of the Schism or the Mongol invasion.

Apologists for Russia have always assigned blame to the West for the Cold War and Russian suffering, and have been fond of drawing specious, ultimately useless comparisons ("People are corrupt everywhere," and so forth). Art Hilgart, for example, suggests that communism merited rescue, and that Churchill, Hitler, and Reagan deserve blame for Russia's current plight. Communism was discredited among Soviet citizens before the fall of the USSR—before Gorbachev, even; perhaps only from the comfortable distance of the United States could it have appeared worthy of a second chance.

Roget's Thesaurus

I must complain that Simon Winchester ("Word Imperfect," May Atlantic) evinces an offensively blithe and dismissive attitude toward Peter Mark Roget's successors.

As one of these, the editor of the 1977 and 1992 updatings of the great original, I can assure Winchester that in my hands the name Roget has not become a synonym for intellectually

second-rate. I urge him to look at the front matter of the 1992 edition, and at its text, to discover the responsible nature of my custodianship.

We lexicographers may or may not be harmless drudges, but we are certainly not foolish or second-rate ones.

*Robert L. Chapman
Madison, N.J.*

In the opening paragraph of his article on *Roget's Thesaurus*, Simon Winchester hints at Roget's "possibly altered standing" by noting that the latest version of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* "gives him somewhat short shrift today, with an entry of a mere twenty lines." Winchester is wrong about the significance of that entry. In working on my book, *Peter Mark Roget: The Word and the Man* (1970), I had occasion to look closely into Roget's connection with the *Britannica*. Through the encyclopedia's many editions from 1824 to 1920 Roget was mentioned not at all; after that he was mentioned only spottily. In the 1974 edition, for example, he got six lines. If we use the *Britannica*'s twenty-line entry as a measure, Roget's standing has improved.

*D. L. Emblen
Santa Rosa, Calif.*

Simon Winchester made the valid point that *Roget's Thesaurus* has enabled the lexically lazy to take some verbal shortcuts and may thus be contributing to the decline of the English language. However, Roget's work should not be wholeheartedly condemned because of the way some people have chosen to use it. A thesaurus can be a valuable tool to one who is interested in the specific meanings of related groups of words and who tackles the thesaurus with a good dictionary sitting nearby. The thesaurus lists related words together, making it easy to look up their meanings in the dictionary one at a time to discover the fine distinctions between them. This would be possible without a thesaurus, but unnecessarily time-consuming. If the price of this aid to literacy is that a few semiliterates will finish the crossword puzzle more quickly, so be it.

*Christie Bane
Yorktown Heights, N.Y.*



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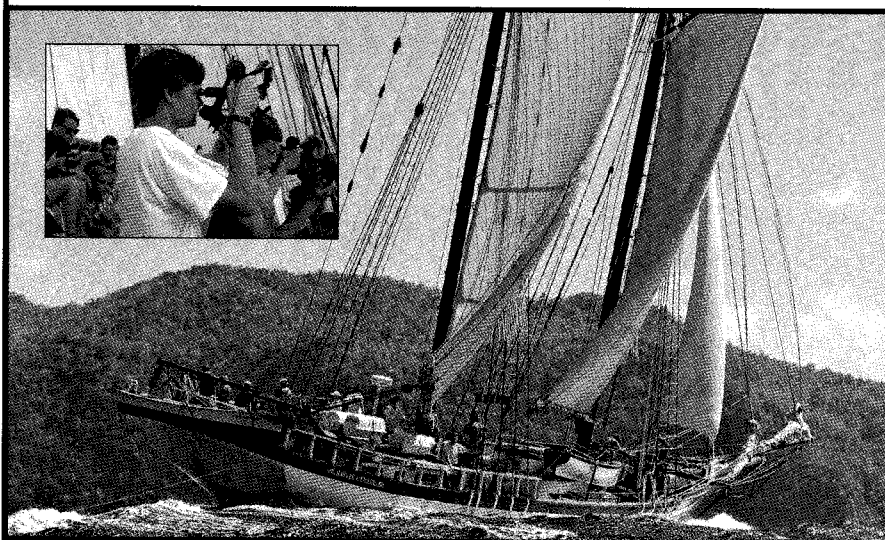
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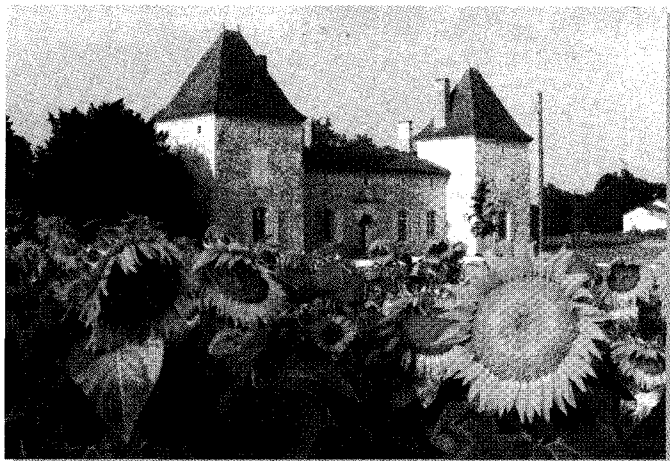
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Roget's Thesaurus can be (and assuredly is) misused, not only in North America but also in Europe and elsewhere. So, too, are dictionaries misused—as are compilations of book reviews, indices of selected quotations, and software-based spelling-verification and grammar-evaluation functions.

Yet even if the *Thesaurus* is sometimes used to "cheat" at crossword puzzles, can Winchester not recognize that some people learn from the consultation? Would he prefer that persons who haven't the time to absorb the entire spectrum of English literature therefore *forgo* literary pursuits?

Elliott Black

Elmhurst, Ill.

Winchester: Arrogant, presumptuous, elitist, didactic, verbose, iconoclastic, impractical.

Jane Olm

Cibola, Texas

Advice & Consent

Herbert Benson's study ("Thy Will Be Done," by Cullen Murphy, April *Atlantic*) to test the efficacy of intercessory prayer (IP) included three groups: one of people who knew they were being prayed for, and two of people who didn't know they were a part of a study; one of those two groups was prayed for, and one was not. I believe the study could have benefited from a fourth group—one that was told it was being prayed for when, in reality, it was not. I also wonder if any attempt was made to quantify the amount of IP. Were the intercessors instructed to pray for a specific duration (say, ten minutes) at a specified frequency (say, three times a day)? How does one factor in the intensity of the IP? Surely some intercessors pray more fervently than others. Do we assume that frequency, duration, and fervency matter when God decides which prayers to answer? Whatever the outcome of this study, I see nothing but a philosophical and theological quagmire.

Laura Barlow

Hilo, Hawaii

I greatly enjoyed William Lange-wiesche's excellent piece on Butte, Montana ("The Profits of Doom," April

Atlantic). Curiously, however, the article fails to mention one of the most interesting examples of the area's environmental renewal—the Old Works Golf Course, in Anaconda. Designed by none other than Jack Nicklaus himself, the course is the first ever built on an Environmental Protection Agency Superfund cleanup site. Some of the original smelting buildings remain, and the bunkers are filled not with sand but with black slag left over from the smelting process.

*Jeff Dufour
New York, N.Y.*

André Pelchat, of Victoriaville, Quebec, seems to believe that only French Roman Catholics emigrated to Quebec (Letters to the Editor, May *Atlantic*). As a descendant of French Protestants (Huguenots) who came to Quebec as early as 1604, I can assure him that he is in error.

The Edict of Nantes (1598), granting limited tolerance to Protestant dissenters, enabled the Huguenots Pierre Chauvin and the Sieur de Monts to sail from France with their followers and establish a post at Tadoussac, Quebec, in 1600. The Sieur de Monts later established a post at St. Croix, which was transferred to Port Royal in 1605. Thereafter a small but steady trickle of Huguenot refugees from religious oppression in France came to Canada. Most came to Quebec, as merchants, soldiers, indentured servants, and even *filles du roi*—wives for Quebec settlers.

Being in a minority, some Huguenots were, over time, absorbed into the French Roman Catholic majority. Some, among them my people, moved to friendlier territory in what would become Ontario.

Despite attempts to overlook it, the Huguenot contribution to Canadian identity cannot be denied. Perhaps it is Mr. Pelchat who owes an apology to Peter Davison, and not vice versa.

*Farley Mowat
Port Hope, Ont.*

Thanks to retired ambassador William Bodde Jr. for shedding some light on the U.S. Department of State's process of "losing" islands and vast seabeds to foreign countries (Letters to the Editor, June *Atlantic*).

He states that he was the lead negotiator in the Carter Administration, which ended up in 1979 with a treaty to give away fourteen U.S. islands and their 200-mile exclusive economic zones to the country of Kiribati, in the South Pacific. Our characterization of this as a "giveaway" was supported by the terms of the treaty, which required no quid pro quo for the American taxpayer.

He complained that it took four years to get congressional approval, but did not reveal that the State Department failed to seek in writing the advice of the Senate during the negotiations over the treaty.

However, the current concern is not over those fourteen U.S. islands. Rather, it's over four additional ones that mysteriously disappeared from American sovereignty to Kiribati with the blessings of the State Department but without benefit of treaty. These are Washington, Fanning, Makin, and Little Makin Islands. The Census Bureau still has not heard anything from the State Department as to how these parts of American soil have disappeared under no known legal method.

Ambassador Bodde mischaracterizes opponents of such giveaways as "fringe groups." State Department Watch was formed in 1984, a year after the 1983 Senate vote on the Kiribati treaty. Our vice-chairman, Mark Seidenberg, brought considerable expertise not only about giveaways to Kiribati but also about giveaways of eight Alaskan islands to the Soviets under the then secret Maritime Boundary Agreement between the United States and the USSR.

Instead of fewer mainstream watchdogs, we need more.

*Carl Olson
Chairman, State Department Watch
Woodland Hills, Calif.*

Editors' Note

In Alex Beam's article "The Mad Poets Society" (July/August Atlantic) biographical information and familial anecdotes about Robert Lowell were attributed to the poet's cousin, Sarah Payne Stuart. We neglected to mention the book in which they appear: Stuart's My First Cousin Once Removed: Money, Madness, and the Family of Robert Lowell, published by HarperCollins in 1998.

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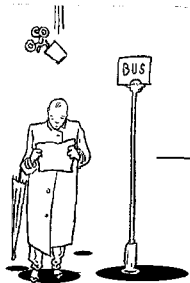


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INNOCENT BYSTANDER

by CULLEN MURPHY

IMMATERIAL CIVILIZATION

What is the intangible equivalent of Angkor Wat or the Acropolis? The United Nations wants to know

.....

A few months ago, during a visit to France, I sat with a friend at breakfast as he scanned the front page of *Le Figaro*. He read for a moment, raised an eyebrow, and then handed the newspaper across the table, pointing to a prominent item below the fold. According to the article, the Italian Minister of Agriculture, Alfonso Pecoraro Scanio, had launched a campaign to have pizza declared, in essence, a World Heritage Concept, under a new program by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO. Scanio's contention was that pizza was not simply a physical object but, rather, partook of a higher, existential estate, and ought to be considered as the embodiment of a certain kind of creative genius. As such, he argued, pizza met the criteria for UNESCO's soon-to-be-announced list of "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity."

This initiative came as news to me. An older UNESCO effort is of course widely known: the World Heritage List, begun in 1972 and today numbering almost 700 sites of "exceptional universal value." These are mostly cultural properties (Stonehenge, Machu Picchu, the pyramids, the Statue of Liberty), but they include many natural locations as well (Yosemite National Park, Kilimanjaro National Park, the Great Barrier Reef, the Galápagos Islands). Although one may quibble with some of the selections (the monuments of Neolithic Orkney, fine, but not the architecture of central Dublin? Taos

Pueblo but not the mesa-top communities of the Hopi?), the designations by and large seem sensible. The sites gain a certain amount of protection and display their World Heritage status on special plaques.

But why limit UNESCO's validating embrace to the realm of the physical? What about manifestations of human genius that may be ubiquitous but also

to learn that the first list of Intangible Masterpieces, chosen by an international jury, would be announced by UNESCO within just a few weeks, in late spring. There were clear indications that pizza wouldn't make the cut (according to *Le Figaro*, UNESCO had not received a nomination for pizza from the Italian government), but one's imagination could play over a range

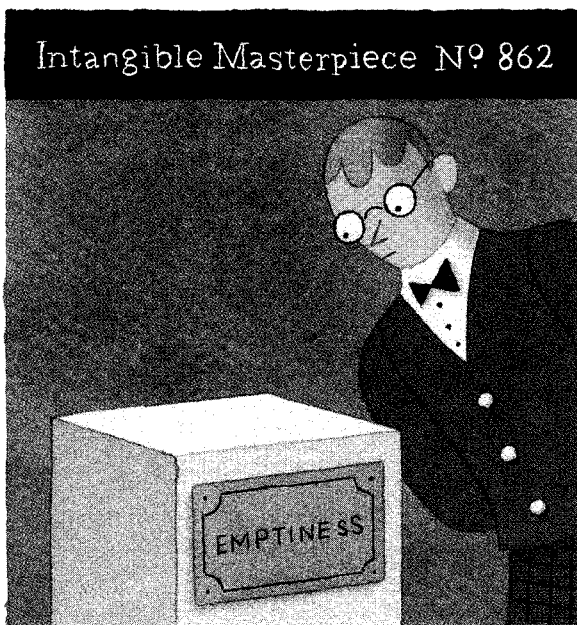
of other possibilities. What, after all, is the intangible equivalent of Angkor Wat or the Acropolis, of Tikal or the Taj Mahal?

Alas, the list, promulgated at UNESCO's Paris headquarters, proved to be a little underwhelming. Japan's Nôgaku theater. The *hudhud* chants of the Ifugao people, in the Philippines. The Orura carnival, in Bolivia. The "cultural space" of the Semeiskie people, in Russia. The music of the transverse trumpets of the Tagbana community, in Côte d'Ivoire. And so on. These are indisputably worthy endeavors. But the overall impression is of program listings for public television at 3:00 A.M.

These are indisputably worthy endeavors. But the overall impression is of program listings for public television at 3:00 A.M.

Happily, UNESCO still has an opportunity to inject vitality and ambition into the enterprise. The organization plans to announce a second group of Intangible Masterpieces in the spring of 2003, and it is already soliciting nominations. Some candidates of real distinction may then be added to the list. Here are a few possibilities.

The white lie. Paleolinguists speculate that the first question asked after



happen to be intangible? These questions began to weigh heavily on the mind of Koichiro Matsuura, the director general of UNESCO. Last March, at Grinzane Cavour Castle, in Italy, Matsuura convened an international conclave to draw up final guidelines for the list of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. That heritage, as Matsuura defined it, represents a broad expanse of conceptual territory—"an infinity of expressions," including the "language, traditional values, and know-how" of human communities.

Looking all this up, after breakfast that morning in France, I was delighted

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human beings developed speech may have been "How do I look?" Civilization itself—based on people's living peaceably in groups—became possible when someone figured out that the correct answer was "You look great!" This is one of the core human insights: that a promiscuous and devil-may-care honesty can be a poor substitute for a lubricious glaze of selfless mendacity. The moral status of the white lie, or *mendacium officiosum*, resists precise calibration, but its social utility is hard to overestimate.

The weekend. Nothing in nature—nothing in mammalian biorhythms or the procession of the heavens—dictates that two days out of seven be devoted to physical relief. And yet here we are, owing in part to the sabbath and perhaps in part to Henry Ford, one of the first industrialists to shut down factories on Saturdays. Leisure is an intangible wrested from the larger intangible of time. "Is it fanciful to propose," the architect and social critic Witold Rybczynski has asked, "that the repetitive cycle of week and weekend is a modern paraphrase of the ancient opposition of profane and sacred time?"

The passive voice. The guardians of language and usage view it with suspicion. William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White, in *The Elements of Style*, stated their opinion of the passive voice (implicitly) in Rule No. 10: "Use the active voice." The magisterial H. W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* maintains that the passive voice often amounts to a "pusillanimous shrinking from responsibility." True. But the passive voice wins allies for the same reason that it garners censure. It blows a soft fog across the hard landscape of causality. "Mistakes were made," said Vice President George Bush of the Iran-contra affair in 1986, accepting blame while carefully deflecting it. This is a conceptual space that at some point shelters everyone.

Regular. We all know what the notion of regular stands for, though its meaning mutates with circumstance. *Regular* coffee. *Regular* gasoline. *Regular* hours. A *regular* customer. A *regular* guy. The notion of regular is the unacknowledged gyroscope of the or-

dinary; in a world of eroding values it testifies to a continuing acceptance of certain conditions as normative. "I know I'm not a regular fellow," says a character in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*, "yet I loathe anybody else that isn't."

Phenomenology. Talk about masterpieces of intangible heritage! Phenomenology speaks to an age-old conundrum: whether the thing called reality possesses any objective underpinnings or is in fact merely an illusion. This is the stuff of giddy speculation and dark nights of the soul. Phenomenology offers the reassurance that an understanding of reality is inseparable from what reality *appears* to be. I know people who have pursued this strategy for years, leading apparently useful and productive lives.

Are these suggestions on a par with the *hudhud* chants of the Ifugao? Do they meet the threshold set by the transverse trumpets of the Tagbana? If not, then what about irony as a candidate for Intangible Masterpiece? What about mnemonic devices or self-fulfilling prophecies? What about compound interest? The International Date Line? Selective amnesia? Hindsight? Procrastination? Getting water marks off finished wood?

What about the schoolyard taunt "nyeah-nyeah-nah-nyeah-nyeah," some variant of which, linguists say, can be found in many cultures; might this melodic jeering be considered an Intangible Masterpiece? Or the existential condition encapsulated by "okay," a word that has infiltrated nearly every culture? What about the idea of privacy—a newcomer to the repertoire of social sensibility? Or what about the space between things—*Zwischenraum*, as the Germans call it, a crucial but intangible component of all relationships? What about silence, the most endangered intangible of our age?

Director General Matsuura has been urging individuals and states to begin compiling an inventory of the world's intangible heritage, and I plan to forward my proposals to the authorities in Paris. One question about the winners: Where will they hang the plaques? ▀

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Every time I call Joe Clark, he is watching television, sitting in front of a thirteen-inch Sears set in his apartment in Toronto. One night recently I caught him during *The Simpsons*. On another occasion I interrupted an episode of *The Practice*. Clark watches several hours of TV a day, and he watches every day. But he is hardly your average couch potato, tuning in to unwind. He is hyperalert, his attention unwavering. His mind isn't just on the action, however: Clark has turned on the closed captions and is focused on the words at the bottom of the screen—even though he is neither deaf nor hard of hearing.

Over the past twenty-five years Joe Clark has become a self-taught expert on closed captions and a gadfly to the captioning industry. As he watches, he collects examples of bad captioning, including misspellings, inconsistencies, awkward placement on the screen, and miscuing, and distributes them to a list-serve he runs, to regulatory agencies, and to captioning companies themselves—efforts for which he receives no remuneration. He has written nearly thirty articles on captioning and media-access issues and is currently writing a book on Web accessibility.

To deaf viewers, an error in a caption is like a burst of static in an otherwise clean signal. As Clark points out, this static is becoming increasingly apparent to hearing people as well. According to Laura Doty, the marketing supervisor at VITAC (for “vital access”), one of the largest American captioning companies, of the perhaps 120 million people

who view captions annually, only 28 million are deaf or hard of hearing. Many of the rest are exposed to captions in airports, health clubs, or bars; others use captions by choice, regarding them as a media form in their own right. And in the years ahead, as Baby Boomers age, the number of people who rely on captions will undoubtedly rise.

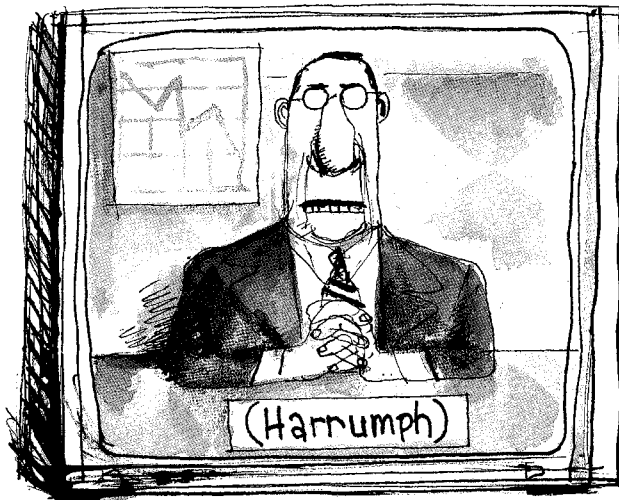
The number of captions will rise as well: in 1999 the Federal Communications Commission announced that with a few exceptions, all television

ment when the boom economy of the 1990s diverted potential court reporters into other jobs. Dianne Stark is a selection and captioning coordinator at the National Association of the Deaf's Captioned Media Program, in Spartanburg, South Carolina, which oversees the captioning of videotapes for a project funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Only twenty-one of thirty-nine captioning companies passed the program's qualifying test on the first try (five of the others subsequently

passed). With no similar screening criteria required by the FCC, Joe Clark's watchdog activities are likely to become increasingly important as the mandate is carried out.

Joe Clark discovered captions late one night in 1977, while twirling the rotary dial on the family TV in his house in Moncton, New Brunswick.

He was twelve years old. He recalls the moment indelibly, down to the fact that he was wearing white pajamas with blue chevrons. “Suddenly,” Clark says, “there was Frank Reynolds, reading the news with visible words.” The program Clark had stumbled on, *The Captioned ABC News*, wasn't the first instance of media captioning (the U.S. Department of Education had been subtitling films for the deaf since the 1950s), nor was it the first instance of television captioning (episodes of *The French Chef* had been captioned some years earlier). It was, however, the first major captioning effort by a U.S. television network. And it forever altered Clark's life.



programs must have closed captions by 2006. Whether the quality of captioning will improve with ubiquity remains to be seen. The FCC mandate provides no quality standards; it doesn't even require that a show be captioned in its entirety. Moreover, it not only has increased business for large, experienced captioning companies but also has spawned hundreds of so-called mom-and-pop caption shops, which are frequently accused of inferior captioning.

In the meantime, the supply of skilled captioners is shrinking. Many court-reporting schools—traditionally one of the most reliable pools of captioning talent—closed for lack of enroll-

Soon he was staying up nightly until 1:00 A.M. to watch the show, a captioned rebroadcast of the *ABC Evening News*. As Clark acknowledges, it was an unusual hobby for a twelve-year-old. "I was attracted to captioning because it provides simultaneous audiovisual input," he says. "For some reason, that kind of multi-track input makes my heart sing." Clark began writing to the Boston station WCBH (whose Caption Center provided the captions for the news) about details that caught his eye—for example, the fact that the lowercase *w* was taller than other letters.

Until 1981 any show that had captions was universally broadcast with them. But that year TV-industry executives, responding to anecdotal evidence that hearing people disliked having text on their screens, took "open" captions off the air. Viewers who wanted captions now needed a decoding device (in 1993 decoders became mandatory on most new TVs). Clark's mother was opposed to buying one (getting her to watch images and read text at the same time was "like asking her to use pinking shears in one hand and a whisk in the other," Clark says), so he spent hours watching captioned shows in the electronics department at Sears. He finally acquired his own decoder when he was twenty-two. He studied linguistics in college and has pursued various interests—he has written about topics ranging from Web design to pop music, and he worked for several years as the only able-bodied person on a team that prompted disability awareness among schoolchildren. All the while he has continued to watch captions more avidly than most people watch TV.

During his decades-long vigil Clark has witnessed a slow but steady evolution. In the early days even high-quality captions used simple grammar and assumed a slow reading speed (120 words or so per minute), because the deaf were thought to be poor readers. Consequently, a lot of material was left out. In the late 1980s the deaf community lobbied for captions closer to verbatim. Now, says Jeff Hutchins, the executive vice-president of planning at VITAC, "the job of the captioner is to convey all

the information that the hearing person gets." Today captions sometimes reach 250 words a minute.

Captioning—rendering speech as text—may appear to be a simple process, but in fact it is highly complicated and prone to error. "Pop-on" captions, added between filming and broadcast, can be edited for accuracy. But "roll-up" captions, used on live shows such as news programs and sports events, are produced in real time, by a captioner using phonetic shorthand on a stenography keyboard. The work is fast-paced and relentless. Valerie Waite is a real-time captioner at Waite & Associates, in Whitby, Ontario (and one of the rare captioners who have earned Clark's praise). During a half-hour live news show she is responsible for capturing every word, without backup or relief. "Every day I hope to do a perfect show," she says. "But it hasn't happened yet, and it probably never will."

Although Clark accepts the inevitability of real-time gaffes, he deems any avoidable error in the pop-on format unacceptable, and he is easily vexed. He criticizes the sans serif fonts typically used for captions as "typographically debased" (among other things, the spacing of their letters cannot be adjusted, and they cannot render many accented letters and other unusual characters), and he complains that to a foreign viewer, the standard U.S. and Canadian practice of using all capital letters "makes everyone seem like they're shouting."

His tone when sharing his views on such matters has earned him a reputation for being sarcastic and prickly. His demeanor has alienated him even from people he has known for decades and from those who agree with many of his criticisms. "I can't pretend to understand the mind of Joe Clark," says Larry Goldberg, the director of the Media Access Group at WCBH. "He gets it right a lot of the time, but he absolutely rubs people the wrong way." So much so, in fact, that some captioning companies now refuse even to listen to what he has to say.

Others, however, clearly appreciate his advocacy. "Joe won't give up," Al-

fred Sonnenstrahl, a telecommunications-accessibility consultant who is deaf, told me recently. "Yes, I've heard of his bugging people. But I tend to read between the lines and find some concerns valid."

Never did Clark's concerns seem more valid than on December 11 of last year—the eve of the U.S. Supreme Court's final decision about the Florida election results. Most of us recall those days for their importance in the history of American politics. For Clark they have more to do with the history of American media. Because the television networks were allowed only audio tracks of the Court's proceedings, they accompanied their broadcasts with real-time open captions. "I have followed this stuff for 20 years, and I have never seen open captioning on five stations simultaneously," Clark wrote to his listserv. "Except for today. A watershed in the acceptance of captioning." —MICHAEL ERARD

BOMBAY

INDIA'S DISAPPEARING VULTURES

The mysterious dwindling of the Subcontinent's natural, and vital, "garbage men"

.....

In 1870 Sir Monier Monier-Williams, a prominent Sanskrit scholar at Oxford University, wrote a vivid description of the Towers of Silence, in Bombay—squat, drum-shaped structures where the Parsis of that city deposit their dead to be eaten by birds.

Though wholly destitute of ornament, and even of the simplest moulding, the parapet of each Tower possesses an extraordinary coping, which instantly attracts and fascinates the gaze. It is a coping formed, not of dead stone, but of living vultures. These birds, on the occasion of my visit, had settled themselves side by side in perfect order, and in a complete circle around the parapets of the Towers, with their heads pointed inwards, and so lazily did they sit there and so motionless was their whole mien that, except for their color, they might have been carved out of the stone-work.

According to Monier-Williams, it took the vultures less than five minutes to consume the flesh of a new corpse. The skeleton would eventually be added to a dry well at the towers' center, to mingle with those of other departed members of the community.

Visiting Bombay today, Monier-Williams would find a vastly different sight. Although the Parsis continue to stack their dead within the towers (their religion, Zoroastrianism, forbids them to contaminate earth, fire, or water with their corpses), the bodies remain unmolested except by the gradual effects of the elements. The vultures crucial to their rapid disposal have largely disappeared. The phenomenon has sparked an ongoing international scientific investigation; however, the reasons for the decline of the vulture population remain unclear. And it is estimated that 90 to 96 percent of India's vultures have already disappeared.

In the early 1990s the Parsis started to notice that there were fewer birds at the towers. At first they assumed that the vultures had simply gone elsewhere—even though large birds are unlikely to abandon a stable source of food. But researchers in other parts of India began to observe a similar condition. In 1997 Vibhu Prakash, a scientist at the Bombay Natural History Society, recorded about forty vulture deaths in a colony in Keoladeo National Park, south of New Delhi—nearly 700 miles from Bombay. Many of the vultures had exhibited a strange behavior before dying, hanging their heads so low that their beaks nearly touched their bellies. In November of 1998 the BNHS sent a "vulture alert" to its patrons and to various organizations around the world, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and The

Peregrine Fund, both of which joined the investigation.

Initially, many scientists suspected pesticides, which have been implicated in the declines of several bird species in the United States, including the brown pelican, the bald eagle, and the peregrine falcon. But although India still uses vast quantities of DDT, the chief culprit in those species' decline, several facts argued against its having caused the vultures' deaths: DDT breaks down much more rapidly in warm climates than in moderate or cold ones; it tends to affect egg



development rather than to kill adult birds; and tissue analysis of Indian vultures revealed only low levels of DDT metabolites.

In the spring of last year Robert Risebrough, a research ecologist who is retired from the University of California system and is now a consultant for the Fish and Wildlife Service, was checking pesticide levels in dead birds in India when he met up with Munir Virani, a Kenya-based raptor biologist who had been sent by The Peregrine Fund to evaluate the problem. Risebrough and Virani spent ten days in Keoladeo Park and nearby areas in

the Indian state of Rajasthan, after which Virani visited West Bengal and the Himalayan floodplain in southern Nepal. Everything they saw confirmed the gravity of the situation. But they soon ran into an obstacle. India, fearing the loss of genetic material to pharmaceutical companies and other organizations interested in patenting the genomes of various organisms, forbids the export of tissue for analysis. In June of last year The Peregrine Fund therefore decided to extend its efforts to Nepal and also to Pakistan, where vulture populations were diminishing and many of the birds, especially near the Indian border, were exhibiting the same strange head drooping.

Two months later Virani traveled to Pakistan to collect tissue samples from dead birds. In November of last year, Patrick Benson, a vulture specialist from South Africa's University of the Witwatersrand who collaborates with The Peregrine Fund, flew to Pakistan to try to obtain some live specimens. The dead birds examined had shown signs of avian gout, a dysfunction of the kidneys that can be associated with lack of water. But the birds appeared to have had constant access to water; studying live birds might yield clues to this puzzle.

Benson found, however, that the people-wise vultures of highly populated Pakistan were much harder to capture than their more innocent African counterparts. They resisted every attempt to lure them: using unskinned rather than skinned carcasses as bait, camouflaging nets with dust, hiding in a blind. The only close approach was by several local mullahs attempting to convert him. After a month Benson went home vultureless. He has returned to Pakistan to try again, but as of this writing has had no success.

The tissue specimens Virani collected were sent to Lindsay Oaks, a Washington State University veterinarian affiliated with The Peregrine Fund. Oaks believes that analyzing the specimens will eventually yield answers, but the process is likely to take some time. He is reluctant to speculate about whether the condition is something new or something old, perhaps exacerbated by changes in the environment.

The Parsis are not the only group to have considered it ordained or necessary to expose their dead to vultures. Tibetan Buddhists also follow the custom, and various individuals—the California poet Robinson Jeffers, for example—have pronounced it a desirable, highly aesthetic fate. Jeffers wrote, “What a sublime end of one’s body, what an enskyment; what a life after death.”

Spiritual considerations aside, the dwindling of vulture populations in and around India has enormous practical consequences. As Rick Watson, the international program director at The Peregrine Fund, says, the vultures are “garbage men—they clean up the environment.” India’s sacred cattle, which live and die in the streets, will not be disposed of without them—virtually all Hindus are forbidden to touch the cattle’s corpses. Other dead animals will also inevitably be left to rot. One result may be an increase in stray dogs (the only “cleaners” left), which could facilitate the spread of rabies. Another may be outbreaks of disease: tuberculosis, anthrax, and foot-and-mouth disease are all easily communicated through neglected carcasses. If the avian affliction spreads to Africa, where vultures clean the corpses of the many animals that die in the wild, matters may be far worse. And transmission is more than a remote possibility: there are no vulture-free corridors between India and Africa.

Three years ago the Parsi community asked Jemima Parry-Jones, a raptor expert and director at the National Birds of Prey Centre, in Gloucestershire, England, to help Parsi architects design a facility where vultures could be bred for release into the wild. Parry-Jones has agreed, but cautions, “You have to understand the incredibly long-term nature of this project ... even if whatever is affecting the wild vultures disappeared next year, it would take two decades or more for vulture numbers to stabilize.” It will be at least five years before captive-bred young can be produced in the facility. In the meantime, corpses continue to pile up at the Towers of Silence, at the rate of about three a day. —STEPHEN BODIO



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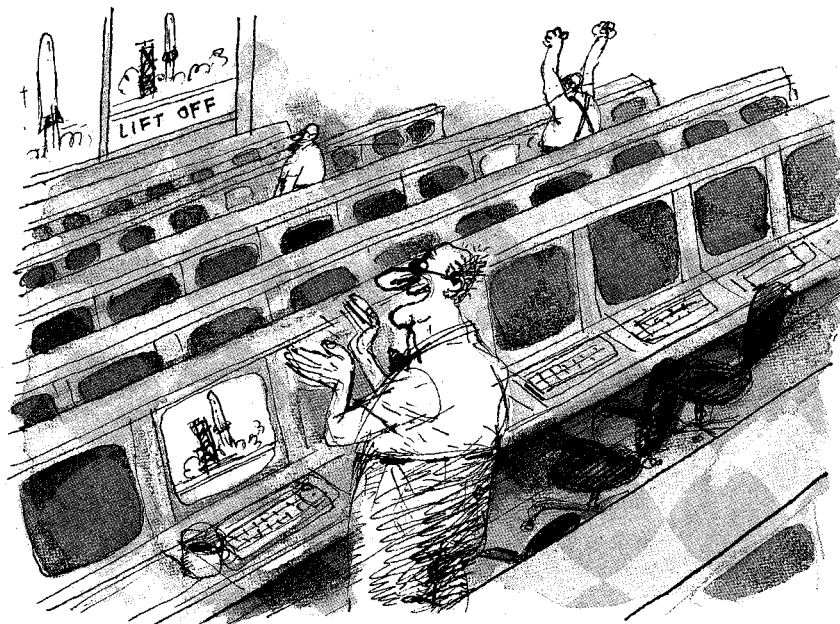
The head of NASA forecasts a bleak future for American science

.....

In 1999 the National Aeronautics and Space Administration suffered two setbacks in its exploration of Mars. In September the \$125 million *Mars Climate Orbiter*, designed to gather information about terrain and climate, was lost in space. In December the \$165 million *Mars Polar Lander*, the *Orbiter's* sister craft, apparently crashed into the planet's surface. NASA does not have a legacy of failure, even in its ambitious Mars program (the *Mars Global Surveyor*, a probe launched in 1996, and the *Mars Pathfinder*, which landed in 1997, were both resounding successes). As the administrator of NASA, I was eager to investigate why these accidents happened. I was disturbed by what I found.

As always, we had very dedicated, intelligent people at NASA. But we did not have enough of them, nor did they have all the experience they needed. Only 700 or so scientists and engineers worked on the two 1999 Mars missions—about the same number that had worked on the *Pathfinder* mission alone. Many of our veteran scientists and engineers had retired and weren't available to train or mentor the few young people we had hired to replace them. And the situation will get worse: currently NASA has twice as many employees over sixty as under thirty.

These problems, of course, are not confined to NASA; they reflect nationwide trends. In the years to come members of the science and engineering work force, along with other members of the national work force, will be retiring at an ever increasing rate. Our most experienced workers will be leaving at a time when our need for them is greatest. The United States is expected to create about two million additional jobs in science and engineering by the end of the decade—an increase in demand of more than 50 percent. If we do not graduate enough students in those fields during that time, the country will be faced with a serious deficit of scientists and engineers.



The country will also be faced with an evaporating dominance. In the 1960s and 1970s the United States was unequaled in aerospace and technology. In the 1980s and 1990s the rest of the world began to close the gap. Now NASA engineers, traveling throughout the world, have concluded that the technical infrastructure supporting the European aircraft industry is, for the first time, equal to ours. More important, Europe is climbing upward while we are sliding downward. In the mid-1980s the United States received 70 percent of all new orders for commercial aircraft. Today it receives 55 percent.

American students, meanwhile, seem to be losing interest in technical careers—from 1983 to 1997 enrollment in undergraduate engineering programs decreased by 19 percent. Much of the problem is simply demographic: from 1980 to 2000 the U.S. college-age population dropped by more than 21 percent, from 21.6 million to 17 million. But although that population will increase in the next decade, we must still worry about the shifting focus of students. In 1986 college students earned about 24,000 degrees in electrical engineering and about 5,000 degrees in parks, recreation, leisure, and fitness. In 1996, they earned nearly 14,000 degrees in each of these fields. Only two years later 4,000 more students were earning degrees in parks, recreation, leisure, and fitness than in electrical engineering.

My concern is not that we have too much leisure in this country but that we are losing talented young people from an industry critical to our global competitiveness and national defense. Right now we are relatively secure. But what's going to happen in the century to come? Will we lead a recreation program for the world? —DANIEL GOLDIN

BOGOTÁ

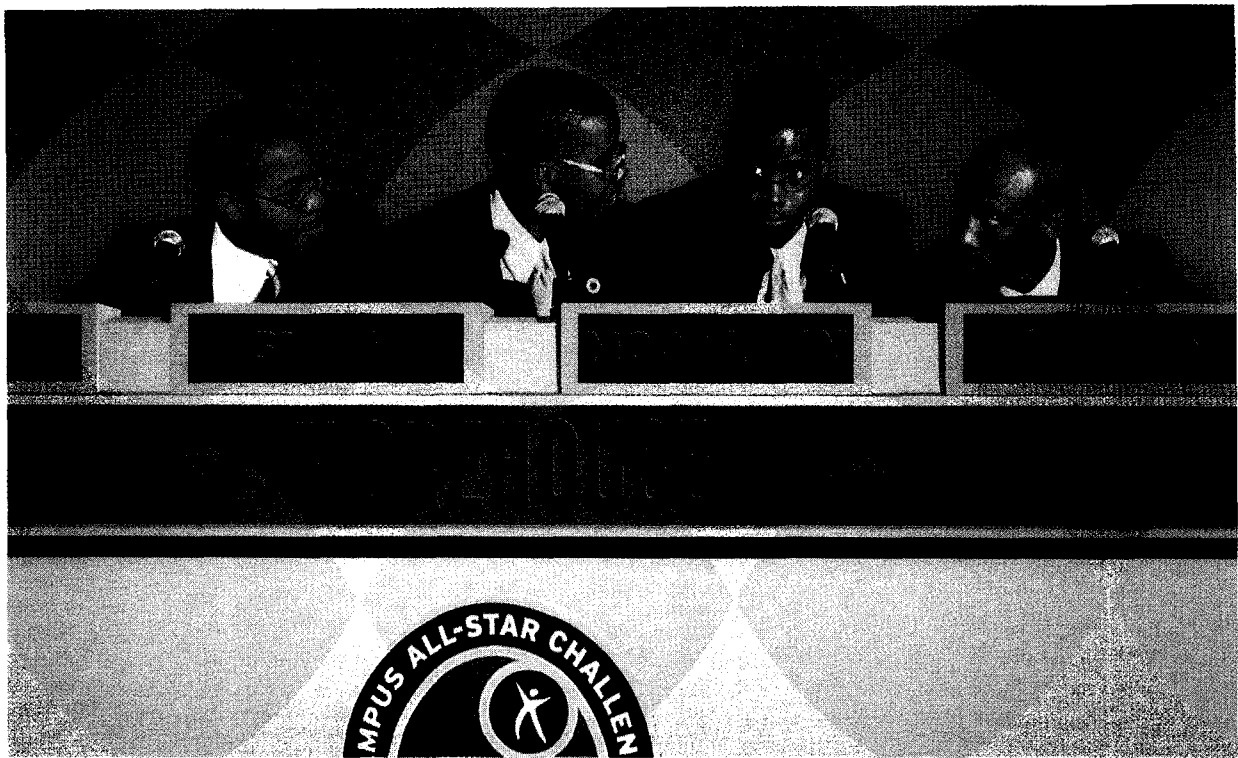
ALL THE CITY'S A STAGE

An eccentric mayor with a flair for the dramatic is bringing hope to a notoriously troubled capital

.....

One Friday night last March in Bogotá, I walked past a Fernando Botero statue of a gargantuan woman on horseback at the entrance to the Parque Renacimiento—a tiny island of calm, containing a number of reflecting pools, in a grimy working-class district in the southern part of the city. I flashed an official card certifying me as a male with good intentions at a National Policewoman stationed at the gate, and crossed into one of the city zones that had been declared temporarily all-female.

It was March 9, dubbed *La Noche de las Mujeres*—an occasion on which a city famous for its machismo was turned over to its female inhabitants. Men without a city-issued pass like the



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one I carried—essentially a signed pact indicating the holder's willingness to learn something from the experience—were asked to stay at home. If they ventured out nonetheless, they were blocked from many of the city's plazas and thoroughfares. A female lieutenant colonel in the National Police was made commander of the city for the night, assisted by a mostly female force of police officers and citizen monitors.

According to pollsters, nearly a quarter of the city's 3.3 million women were out that night—an enormous showing that cut across class lines. In the southern barrios grandmothers and their granddaughters trooped into the Parque Renacimiento to hear a storyteller. In the city's affluent north sophisticated young women, for whom going out with their girlfriends was hardly a revolutionary act, listened to a female band at a tidy little park and coyly threw handfuls of flour at the few males seated self-consciously at an adjacent outdoor café.

La Noche de las Mujeres was the creation of Bogotá's mayor, Antanas Mockus, who has a penchant for free-wheeling social experiments to combat the violence and alienation that have corroded Bogotá's social fabric. La Noche was prompted, he told me, by Bogotá's unique combination of social conditions. Men are not only far more likely than women to commit violence but also forty times as likely to be its victims. At the same time, women have improved their status in Colombia—

which has one of the highest levels of political participation by women in all of Latin America—through a wholly nonviolent struggle. La Noche would provide an opportunity to see what might be learned from women's forms of social organization and would also serve as an experiment in protecting men from themselves. As it turned out, violence on La Noche was 40 percent lower than on ordinary Friday nights.

The day before La Noche, I visited Mockus in his office at city hall. Seated under a huge portrait of Simón Bolívar signing Colombia's declaration of independence from Spain, he hunched over a scrap of paper and sketched three boxes. The first he labeled "legal power"—something one would expect of a big-city mayor. What marked him as an unusual politician was the other two boxes: "moral power" and "cultural power," which he defines as power derived from one's own standards and power derived from the shared values of the citizenry.

"At first," Mockus told me, "I had the illusion that if I wrote new laws, those words would become reality. But it soon became clear that if you want to change society's habits, law is only one of the means. Most people prefer internal mechanisms for determining for themselves what is right and what is wrong, but perceive other people as needing to be regulated by laws. The question I asked was how to reduce the difference between the laws and cultural and moral means of self-regulation."

A governing style that could fairly be summed up as theater-as-politics was the result.

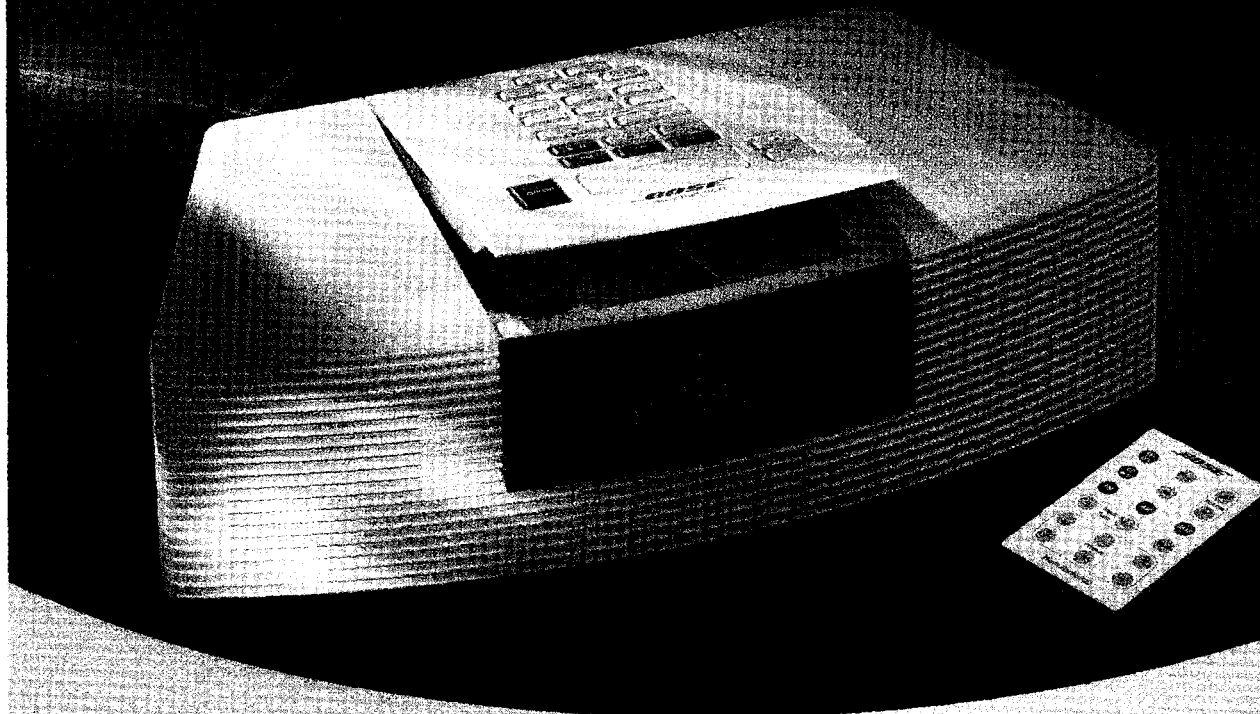
Indeed, Bogotá has been transformed in the past six years by Mockus's combination of street-level politics—he has expanded the city's public parks, launched a modern bus system, and built schools in the city's poorest districts—and symbolic acts. In part because of his imposition of a 1:00 A.M. closing for bars (proclaimed Carrot Hour, from the Colombian slang for someone who is uncool) and his unconventional but effective gun-exchange program (those who turned in weapons received small gifts of appreciation, such as flowers or food, and a certificate commending their act), Bogotá's murder rate has plummeted. Some 4,200 murders were committed in the city in 1993; the figure for last year is 2,200.

Bicyclists pedal along newly designated bike lanes; strangers relate to one another with small acts of civility. In 1996 the city government distributed tens of thousands of plastic cards depicting thumbs. When someone engaged in uncivil behavior, the thumb was to be pointed down; for a genial act it was to be pointed up. The thumb cards have disappeared for the most part, but the habit took hold, and it is not unusual for the real thing to flash upward after the observation of an unexpected act of courtesy or kindness.

The humble sidewalk is an early example of Mockus's attentiveness to the interplay between municipal gov-



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ernance and civic responsibility and pride. Until the mid-1990s visitors to Bogotá would have noticed the lack of sidewalks. Cars would park right up against storefronts, and walking down the street involved a perilous zigzag through an obstacle course of bumpers and swinging car doors. Five years ago Mockus initiated a sidewalk-construction program. Now people stroll down the sidewalks, and at intersections they cross in an orderly fashion on the neatly painted white stripes known as zebras. Taxi drivers who attended new city-sponsored classes in driver etiquette (the classes taught, among other things, the principle of yielding to pedestrians) were awarded windshield stickers proclaiming them "gentlemen of the zebras."

Such measures carry both practical and symbolic punch. "The lack of a sense of citizenship in Bogotá was reflected in our lack of sidewalks," Salomón Kalmanovitz, an economist and a director of Colombia's National Bank, told me. "There is a dignity that comes from not walking on the dirt or being forced to walk on the street. Building those sidewalks was an acknowledgment that eighty-five percent of the people in Bogotá do not own cars. You are telling drivers that they are no better than the pedestrians, which people from the car-owning class are not accustomed to hearing."

Similarly, in 1996, rather than hire more traffic cops, Mockus hired dozens of mimes, who stood at major intersections and, with slyly comic, extravagant gestures, admonished drivers who ran red lights, veered in front of pedestrians, or committed other violations. The city experienced an immediate decline in traffic accidents—proof of his theory that power can be wielded with a sense of humor. In the face of Bogotá's deep distrust of traditional authority, Mockus told me, "sometimes you need a little cognitive dissonance."

Mockus, who is forty-nine and the son of Lithuanian immigrants, spent eighteen years as a professor of mathematics and philosophy and then rector at Colombia's National University—a background that helps to account for his pedagogical approach to govern-

ing. "Antanas sees the city as a huge classroom," Alicia Eugenia Silva, his deputy mayor, says. Mockus was elected mayor in 1995. He resigned two years later and ran, unsuccessfully, for Vice President; he regained his office in a resounding victory last October.

In a country long dominated by the Liberal and Conservative Parties, Mockus is an independent, a founding member of the Visionario Party. Although his social policies tend toward the left, a legacy of his years in Bogotá's radical university culture, his economic policies are largely neo-conservative: for example, during his first term he engineered a number of privatizations and municipal cutbacks.

In spite of his successes, Mockus faces formidable challenges. Twenty percent of the city's residents are unemployed, and more than half live in poverty or near poverty. Last year alone some 150,000 people flocked to Bogotá to escape the civil war in the countryside; slums sprawl ever upward into the hills around the city. At the same time, FOR RENT and FOR SALE signs abound in the better neighborhoods, as upper- and middle-class residents, tired of paying the "war taxes" extorted from

business owners by the guerrillas, leave the country, often for the United States.

Not surprisingly, Mockus has his critics. One of the most vocal is María Emma Mejía, a member of the Liberal Party who served as Foreign Minister under President Ernesto Samper and who ran against Mockus last October. "Mockus's whole approach is to shock people out of their reality," Mejía says. "But reality in Colombia now is enough to shock people out of their reality. We have real problems in Bogotá, and his symbols do nothing to address them."

Mockus, of course, is quick to counter this assessment. "We live in a world of symbols," he says. He showed me his wedding ring, explaining that it is a sort of talisman for his administration. The ring is a gold Möbius strip—a continuous one-sided band in the shape of a twisting circle. The Möbius strip—large-scale models of which served as backdrops during many of his campaign appearances—is a symbol, Mockus says, of the fact that "we share conflicts in the country, but we are all deeply linked." He continued, "Whenever I get involved in strong conflicts, I look at my finger and try to remember that in the end we are all on the same side." —MARK SCHAPIRO

LOS ANGELES

UP IN SMOKE

Next door to deadly violence life goes on

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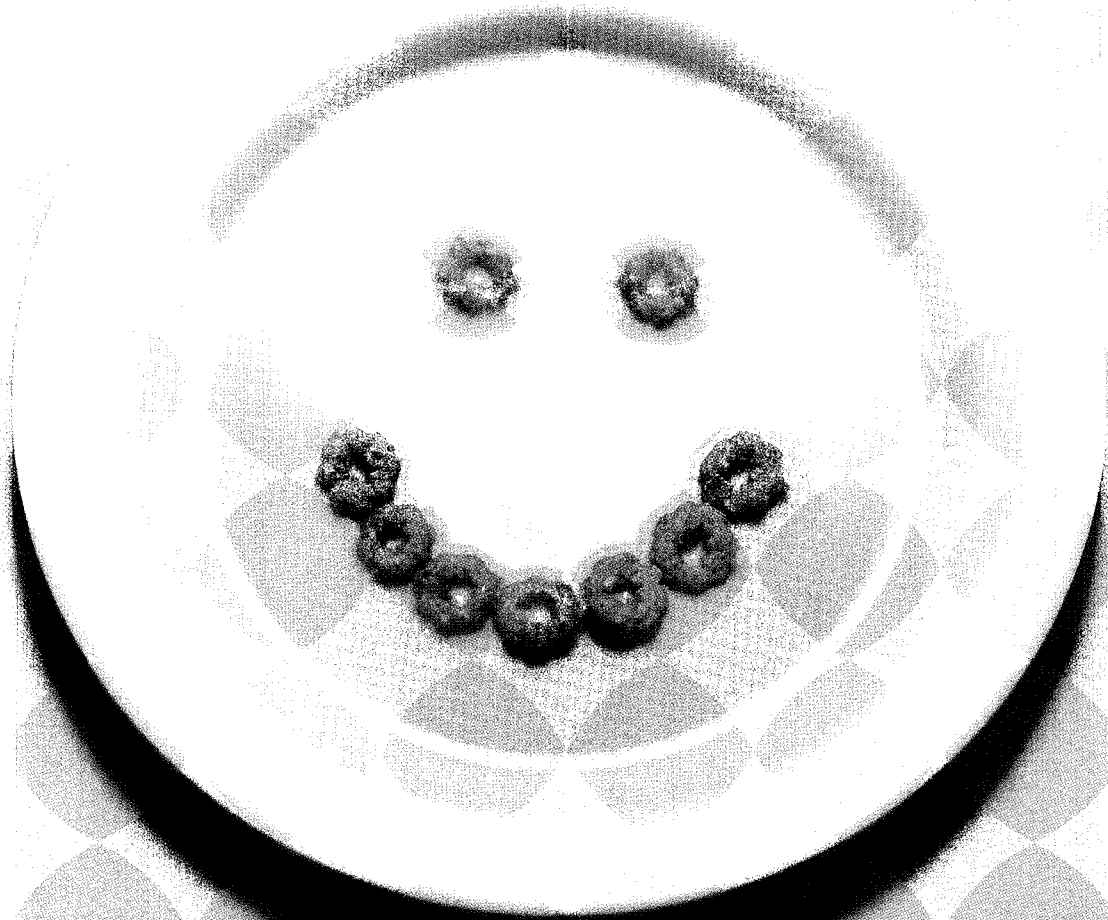
The first gunshot came before 6:00 A.M., and although it sounded as if it was right in front of our house, neither my wife nor I wanted to bother calling 911. It was only one shot—hardly a cause for alarm. Here in L.A.'s Echo Park neighborhood we hear gunfire routinely, either from gang kids showing off on a Saturday night or from the Police Academy firing range, just over the hill in Elysian Park.

Twenty minutes later Regina, the homeopath across the street, left a message on our answering machine saying there were SWAT cops all over her front yard. She sounded annoyed. "Do you know what's going on? The police say I should go to the safest room of the house, but which one is that?"

That got us up. I started the coffee and walked down the front steps to get the newspaper and see what was happening. Halfway down I saw that the street below was blocked by three black-and-whites, their doors open. An officer crouching behind one door had his gun out, and when he saw me, he waved and yelled, "Go back inside!"

And so began the last day of life for my neighbor, forty-year-old Paul Jacobson. Like me, Paul was white, educated, balding, and seemingly financially secure. He had no visitors that I ever saw other than his longtime girlfriend, Sandra, and even she hadn't been around much lately.

In the thirty months we were neighbors, we had only three conversations:



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when my wife and I first moved in and I wanted to trim the eucalyptus trees that bordered our properties; about six months later, when his white husky killed one of our pet ducks; and finally a year ago June, one night at about eleven, when he exploded in a rage because of smoke from our wood-burning hot tub. His last words to me were screamed from the darkness of the bushes just inside his property line: "Come over here and I'll blow your fucking head off! You're going down!"

Paul scared me, I admit it, and I resented him for it. When I saw the

later by a burst of semi-automatic fire. "Oh, come on, Paul," the negotiator said. He sounded disappointed. "That's not helping things."

Paul screamed something about the CIA and the FBI and their having the wrong address. "Keep the cameras rolling!" he yelled out his front door. "They're gonna kill me."

Around 1:00 P.M. the SWAT team that had taken up positions in our front yard started firing tear gas into his house. Paul replied with shotgun blasts and more bursts from his semi-automatics. And so it continued all afternoon, the excitement gradually giving way to an

our garden hoses, hoping to contain the blaze. We were evacuated over the back fence just as Paul's ammo dump caught fire, setting off hundreds of exploding rounds.

The fire brought helicopters to the scene. The story had become newsworthy then, according to the reporters I talked to that night. It brought back memories of the Symbionese Liberation Army shootout.

"We get lots of barricade stories," a woman from the local ABC affiliate told me. "But not many of them have this dramatic a finish."

More than twenty pistols and rifles were pulled out of the rubble of the house; a shed in back was found to contain gunpowder, casings, and primers—all the makings of homemade bullets. There were .22 longs, .38s, .45s. Paul was found dead inside a walk-in fireproof safe he used as his gun locker. His body was crumpled, knees drawn up as if in prayer.

I feel relief that Paul's threatening presence is gone, and as time goes on, I think about him less often, less intently. But I wish I knew why he died this way. Who was he? Where did he work? Was he mentally ill, or a drug abuser? How did he get his guns? Why was he so angry all the time?

People say L.A. is a place where nobody really knows his neighbors. Maybe it's true. A year ago we did our best to care for the neighbor on the other side of our house, who was dying of cancer. Before she went into the hospital, she tidied up her life, finally throwing out the pitiful estate of her son, who had died years before. A white supremacist with a methamphetamine problem, he was killed in a motorcycle accident; he left behind boxes of Nazi medals, Nazi flags and videos, a box full of ammo, and a carton of used syringes. According to a story told in the neighborhood, there was also a bomb—which was carried down to the local police station, and which the bomb squad said could have blown up our entire block. But neither the police nor any other official source has any record of this incident, so that's one more thing I'll never really know. —JEFF SPURRIER



police taking up positions around his house that morning at dawn, I was glad that I wasn't involved. I didn't know we would spend the next twelve hours under siege, bearing witness to Paul's suicide-by-cop.

By 9:00 A.M. an LAPD armored vehicle had arrived. A negotiator spoke to Paul on a bullhorn, trying to assure him that everything would be fine if he would just put down his gun and come out. A little before ten the sound of a gunshot came from inside Paul's house, and I wondered if he'd shot himself. It was followed a few minutes

almost boring repetitiveness. My wife, a photographer by trade, ventured to the front window from time to time to try to shoot some video footage. Admonished by the SWAT team to keep in the back of the house, we tried to make cookies, but we were out of eggs. I called Regina and, to make her laugh, asked her if she could send some up with a SWAT guy. We worked on our taxes.

At 5:00 P.M. the police switched to flash-bang grenades. Almost immediately smoke began coming out of Paul's house, and a suddenly panicky SWAT team fumbled desperately with

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THE EARLY-DECISION RACKET

Early-decision programs—whereby a student applies early to a single school, receives an early answer, and promises to attend if accepted—have added an insane intensity to middle-class obsessions about college. They also distort the admissions process, rewarding the richest students from the most exclusive high schools and penalizing nearly everyone else. But the incentives for many colleges and students are as irresistible as they are perverse

BY JAMES FALLOWS

Illustrations by Bill Nelson

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In 1978 Willis J. Stetson, known as Lee, became the dean of admissions at the University of Pennsylvania. The new job was quite a challenge. Penn at the time was in a weak position. In an era when big-city crime rates were still rising, its location in West Philadelphia was a handicap. Its promotional efforts took pains to point out that despite its name, the University of Pennsylvania was a private university and a member of the Ivy League, like Yale and Harvard, not of a state system, like the University of Texas. But within the Ivy League, Penn had acquired the role of backup or safety school for many applicants. "I would estimate that in the 1970s maybe forty percent of the students considered Penn their first choice," Stetson told me recently. For the rest, Penn was the place that had said yes when their first choice had said no.

Stetson's job, and that of the Penn administration in general, was to make the school so much more attractive that students with a range of options would happily choose to enroll. Through the next decade the campaign to make Penn more desirable was a success. As urban life became safer and more alluring, Penn's location, like Columbia's, became an asset rather than a problem. Stetson and his staff traveled widely to introduce the school to potential applicants. When Stetson first visited the Harvard School, a private

school for boys in California's San Fernando Valley, he found that few students had even heard of Penn. The school is now coed and known as Harvard-Westlake, and of the 261 seniors who graduated last June, more than a quarter applied to Penn. The Lawrenceville School, in New Jersey, and Phillips Exeter Academy, in New Hampshire,

have in recent years sent more students to Penn than to any other college. Colleges may complain bitterly about rankings of their relative quality, especially the "America's Best Colleges" list that *U.S. News & World Report* publishes every fall, but a college is quick to cite its ranking as a sign of improvement when its position rises. When *U.S. News* published its first list of best colleges, in 1983, Penn was not even ranked among national universities. Last year it was tied with Stanford for No. 6—ahead of Dartmouth, Columbia, Cornell, and Brown in the Ivy League, and of Duke and the University of Chicago.

Penn's improvement through the 1980s was due largely to its shrewd recruitment and marketing efforts. Then, in the early 1990s, like all other colleges, it encountered a "baby bust"—a drop in the total number of college applicants, caused by a fall in birth rates eighteen years before. Penn coped with that change by investing in its curriculum, faculty, and physical plant. It also made unusually effective

use of the most controversial tactic in today's elite-college admissions business: the "early decision" program.

Early decision has helped not only Penn. It holds so many advantages for so many colleges that its use has grown steadily over the past decade and mushroomed in the past five years. But the advantages it gives these institutions are outweighed by the harm it does to most students and to the college-selection process. In the view of many high school counselors, it has added an insane intensity to parents' obsession about getting their children into one of a handful of prestigious colleges. Everyone involved with the early-decision process admits that it rewards the richest students from the most exclusive high schools and penalizes nearly everyone else.

The rise of early decision has coincided with, and may have contributed to, the under-reported fact that the Scholastic Aptitude Test, or SAT, is becoming more rather than less influential in determining who gets into college—despite continual criticism of the SAT's structure and effects, and despite the proposal this year from Richard Atkinson, the head of the vast University of California system, that UC campuses no longer consider SAT scores when assessing applicants. The increased use of early decision shows the strong drive for colleges to make themselves look better statistically. The increased emphasis on SAT scores shows the same thing.

Today's high school students and their parents have no choice but to adapt their applications strategies to the way early decision has changed the nature of college admissions. Tomorrow's students should hope that the increasingly obvious drawbacks of the system will lead to its elimination.

HOW EARLY DECISION WORKS

High school college-admissions counselors often describe their work as a matchmaking process. What they mean to suggest is the great diversity of potential partners, the need to find a match that suits each student, and the reality that if things don't click with one partner, there are many other candidates.

Early decision, or ED, is an arranged marriage: both parties gain security at the expense of freedom. But the loss is asymmetrical, constraining the student much more than the institution. That is why many counselors view ED as a device promoted by colleges for their own purposes, with incidental benefits to other institutions and companies—

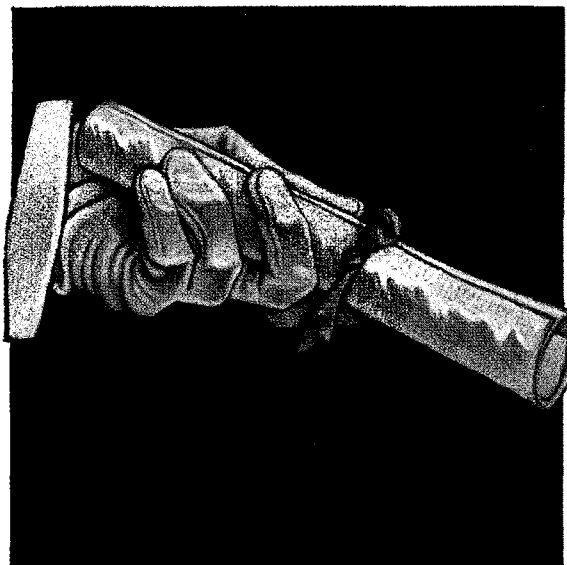
but not to students. Seppy Basili, a vice-president of Kaplan, Inc., the test-prep firm formerly known as Stanley Kaplan, says that an emphasis on earlier applications and admissions has been a boon for his company. "We're seeing kids come to us earlier, prepare earlier, prepare more, and from a business aspect that's great," he says. The most experienced counselors at private schools and strong public high schools can also turn ED programs to their advantage, he says, because they know how to exploit the opportunities the system has created. "It would be naive to think we could ever come up with a system that would not allow someone to play games," Basili says, "but it seems like this one is *built* for people to play games."

Here is how the game is played. In the regular decision process, which most students still follow, students spend the first semester of their senior year deciding on the group of colleges—four, six, thirty-three in one extreme case I heard about—to which they wish to apply. Regular

applications are generally due by January 1. The colleges take three months to consider the applications, and respond by early April. Students have until May 1—the single deadline in this cycle adhered to by most colleges—to send a deposit to the school they want to attend and a "No, thanks" to any other that has accepted them. The colleges tally the returns and adjust the size of their incoming classes by accepting students on their waiting lists.

In ED programs students start their senior year ready to choose the one college they would most like to attend, and having already taken their SATs. An early applicant is allowed to make only one ED application, and it is due in the beginning or the middle of November. The college has about a month to deliberate and responds by mid-December. If the answer is no, the student has two weeks to send out regular applications to schools on his or her backup list. If the answer is yes, the process is over, because by virtue of applying early, the student has promised to attend the college if accepted. How is this enforced? Mainly through counselors, who know when a student has been admitted ED and agree not to send official transcripts to other schools.

A similar-sounding but different program is called early action, or EA. The similarity is that students' applications are due in November and they get a response by December. The difference is that the EA agreement is not binding: even after getting a yes, the student can apply to other places in the regular way and wait until May to make a choice.



Six years ago Yale and Princeton switched from early action to binding early decision, and Stanford, which had previously resisted all early programs, instituted a binding ED plan. For this fall's applications Brown has switched from EA to binding ED. The remaining major colleges that still offer nonbinding EA plans include Cal Tech, the University of Chicago, Georgetown, Harvard, MIT, and Notre Dame.

Below this formal structure lies a crucial reality, which Penn is almost alone in forthrightly disclosing: students have a much better chance of being admitted if they apply early decision than if they wait to join the regular pool.

For instance, when selecting its class of 2004, which entered college last fall, Yale admitted more than a third (37 percent) of the students who applied early and less than a sixth (16 percent) of those who applied regular. The most extreme difference among major colleges was at Columbia, where 40 percent of the earlys and 14 percent of the regulars were accepted. Amherst accepted 35 percent of the earlys and 19 percent of the regulars. Hamilton College, in upstate New York, took 70 percent of the earlys and 43 percent of the regulars. At the University of Pennsylvania 47 percent of early applicants and 26 percent of regular applicants were admitted.

These comparisons obviously count for something. The chance of being lost in the shuffle was presumably less among Princeton's 1,825 ED applicants last year, of whom 31 percent (559) were accepted, than among its 11,900 regulars, of whom about 11 percent got in. But these simple comparisons make the early advantage look larger than it really is. At very selective schools like Princeton students in the ED pool have better grades and higher test scores than regular applicants, so it could be called fair and logical that a higher proportion of them get in. Harvard admits more than a quarter of its nonbinding early-action applicants and only a ninth of its regular pool. William Fitzsimmons, Harvard's director of admissions, says that standards applied to its early and regular applicants are identical: the difference in acceptance rate, he claims, comes purely from the fact that so many students with a good chance of being admitted apply early, whereas the regular pool contains a larger proportion of long shots. "We put on our 'spring hats,'" he told me recently, "and if there is someone we are absolutely sure we will admit in the spring, we make the offer in the fall. We are very comfortable with these decisions."

The real question about the ED skew is whether the prospects for any given student differ depending on when he or she applies. Last fall Christopher Avery, of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and several colleagues produced smoking-gun evidence that they do. The authors analyzed five years' worth of admissions records from fourteen selective colleges, involving a total of 500,000 applications, and interviewed 400 college students, sixty high school seniors, and thirty-five counselors. They found that

at the ED schools an early application was worth as much in the competition for admission as scoring 100 extra points on the SAT. For instance, a student with a combined SAT score of 1400 to 1490 (out of 1600) who applied early was as likely to be accepted as a regular-admission student scoring 1500 to 1600. An early student scoring 1200 to 1290 was *more* likely to be accepted than a regular student scoring 1300 to 1390.

The equivalent of a 100-point increase in SAT scores makes an enormous difference in an applicant's chances, especially for a mid-1400s candidate. Indeed, the difference is so important as to be a highly salable commodity. A gain of roughly 100 points is what The Princeton Review guarantees students who invest \$500 and up in its test-prep courses. The Avery study's findings were the more striking because what admissions officers refer to as "hooked" applicants were excluded from the study. These are students given special consideration, and therefore likely to be admitted despite lower scores, because of "legacy" factors (alumni parents or other relatives, plus past or potential donations from the family), specific athletic recruiting, or affirmative action.

A counselor at a private school that has long sent many of its graduates to Penn showed me a list of the students from that school who had applied to Penn last year. The students were listed in order of their high school grade-point average—usually the strongest single factor in college admissions—with indications of whether they had applied early or regular and whether they had been accepted or not. Some students far down in the class who applied early were accepted; some students thirty or forty places above them in class rank who applied regular were denied. The counselor did not stop to calculate exactly how much an early decision was "worth" in terms of grade-point average, but it clearly made a difference.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR THE COLLEGES?

The more selective the college, the harder it is for outsiders to determine why any particular student was or was not accepted. Were too many kids applying from the same school? (At most colleges each admissions officer is responsible for screening applications from a certain group of schools: the advantage is that the officers become very sophisticated about the strengths of each school, and the disadvantage is that they inevitably compare each school's applicants with one another and send only the relatively strongest along.) Was the college recruiting for a certain athletic or musical skill? Was this boy admitted because of a legacy preference? Would that girl have gotten in if her parents had been more consistent donors?

When pressed for explanations, admissions officers usually avoid discussing specific cases and talk instead about the varied interests they must try to balance in "crafting" each freshman class. But under the unusually candid Lee

Stetson, Penn has exposed some of the inner workings of the black box that is the admissions process. "We have had a policy in place for close to thirty years that legacy applications are given special consideration only during early decision," Stetson told me last spring. The reasoning, he explained, is that if a legacy candidate is not sure enough about coming to Penn to apply ED, then Penn has no real stake in offering preferential consideration later on. "Years ago many children of alums were not viewing Penn as their first choice, so they didn't apply early," he said. "We said we were willing to give them a measure of preference, but only if they were serious about coming." It made sense, he added, for Penn to extend the policy to applicants in general: if they are extra serious about Penn, Penn will make an extra effort for them. "We've been very direct about it," Stetson told me. "Everybody likes to be loved, and we're no exception. Everybody likes to see a sign of commitment, and it helps in the selection process." Bruce Poch, the admissions director at Pomona College, in California, is generally a critic of an overemphasis on early plans, but he agrees that they can help morale. "It's worth something to the institution to enroll kids who view the college as their first choice," he says. "Fewer people are whining about transferring from Day One. They turn out to be a lot of the campus leaders." This was part of Penn's strategy in pushing its binding ED plan. "I would say that these days eighty percent of our students view Penn as their first choice," Lee Stetson concluded. "You can't overstate what that does for the mood of the campus."

It does something else as well, which is understood by every college administrator in the country but by very few parents or students. The more freshmen a college admits under a binding ED plan, the fewer acceptances it needs from the regular pool to fill its class—and the better it will look statistically. That statistical improvement can have significant consequences.

The natural tendency to esteem what is rare—a place in, say, an Ivy League freshman class—has been dramatically reinforced by the growth of journalistic rankings of colleges. The *U.S. News* list ranks national universities from 1 through 50, national liberal-arts colleges from 1 through 50, and other institutions in other ways. It remains the best known of the rankings, but many other publications now provide similar features. (I was the editor of *U.S. News* from 1996 to 1998.)

College administrators dispute both the technical basis on which these rankings are compiled and the larger idea that institutions with very different purposes can be considered better or worse than one another. Cal Tech, for example, is so different from Yale that whether it is better or worse depends on an individual student's aims. But everyone involved with college admissions and administration recognizes that the rankings have enormous impact. They affect the

number of students who apply to a school, donations from alumni, pride and satisfaction among students and faculty members, and even the terms on which colleges can borrow money in the financial markets. Like getting to the Final Four in college basketball or winning a prominent post-season football game, moving up in the college rankings makes everything easier for a college's administrators.

When the *U.S. News* rankings began, they were based purely on a reputational survey, similar to polls of coaches for college-football standings: college administrators were asked to list the institutions they considered best, and from these figures *U.S. News* compiled its list. Year by year *U.S. News* added more variables to its ranking formula, such as financial resources, graduation rate, and student-faculty ratio. Most of these variables are difficult for a college to change over the short term. Indeed, the only ones guaranteed to change year by year are those involving the admissions office: the number of students who apply, the proportion who are accepted, the SAT scores of those who are admitted, and the proportion of those accepted who ultimately enroll. "Institutions of higher education are much more competitive with each other on a whole variety of measures than you would think," says Karl Furstenberg, the dean of admissions at Dartmouth. "Because it is an annual activity, admissions is one aspect of university life where you can have a more immediate impact on the character of an institution than you can in the long-term process of building academic programs."

The statistical measures that matter here are a college's selectivity and its yield. They are related, and both are taken as indicators of a school's desirability. Selectivity measures how hard a school is to get into. A school that accepts one applicant out of four, like the University of California at Berkeley, is more selective than one that accepts two out of three, like UC Davis. To the extent that college admission is seen as a trophy, the more applicants a given college rejects, the happier those it accepts—and their parents—will be.

A college's yield is the proportion of students offered admission who actually attend. If selectivity measures how frequently a college rejects students, yield measures how frequently students accept a college. In practice yield measures "takeaways"; if Georgetown gets a student who was also admitted to Duke, Boston College, and Northwestern, it scores a takeaway from each of the other schools. The higher the yield and the larger the number of takeaways, the more desirable the school is thought to be. "In a typical year Stanford would let in twenty-five hundred kids to get a class of fifteen hundred," says Jonathan Reider, a former admissions officer at Stanford who is now the college-admissions director at University High School, a private school in San Francisco. "One thousand would say no. Of them, about four hundred went to Harvard, a hundred and fifty to Yale and Princeton each—that's 700 right there. Fifty

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to Berkeley, fifty to UCLA. For a number of years we looked at that Harvard takeaway number and wanted it to go down, but it never did.”

It is important to mention a reality check here, which is that American colleges as a whole are grossly *unselective*. Of the country’s 3,000-plus colleges, all but about a hundred take most of the students who apply. Nonetheless, anxiety about admission to the remaining schools affects a significant part of upper-level American society. Without it the test-prep industry, private schools, and suburban housing patterns would all be very different.

From a college’s point of view, the most important fact about early decision is that it provides a way to improve a college’s selectivity and yield simultaneously, and therefore to move the school up on national-ranking charts. It will take a few paragraphs’ worth of figures to explain how colleges weigh early and regular applicants and who therefore does or does not get in at which point.

Suppose a college needs to enroll 2,000 students in its incoming class. Suppose it receives roughly 12,000 applications each year in the regular admissions cycle—a realistic estimate for a prestigious, selective school. Suppose, finally, that its normal yield for students admitted in the regular cycle is 33 percent—that is, for each three it accepts, one will enroll. This, too, is a realistic figure for most top-tier schools. So to end up with 2,000 freshmen on registration day, a college relying purely on a regular admissions program would send “We are pleased to announce” letters to 6,000 applicants and hope that the usual 33 percent decided to enroll. A regular-only admissions policy would thus mean that the college’s selectivity rate—6,000 acceptances for 12,000 applicants—was an unselective-sounding 50 percent.

Now suppose that the college introduces an early-decision plan and admits 500 applicants, a quarter of the class, that way. Suddenly its statistics improve. It is very likely to receive at least as many total applications as before—say, 1,000 in the ED program and 11,000 regulars. But now it will have to send out only 5,000 acceptance letters—500 earlies plus 4,500 to bring in 1,500 regular students. Therefore its selectivity will improve to 42 percent from the previous 50, and its yield will be 40 percent rather than the original 33, because all those admitted early will be obliged to enroll.

Finally, suppose that the college decides to admit fully half the class early, as some selective colleges already do. It will need to send out only 4,000 offers to get 2,000 students. Its selectivity will become an impressive 33 percent and its overall yield will be 50 percent. With no change in faculty, course offerings, endowment, or characteristics of the entering class, the college will have risen noticeably in national rankings.

That is how Penn used an aggressive early-decision policy to drive up its rankings—and not just Penn. Swarthmore’s yield for regular applicants, the so-called open-market

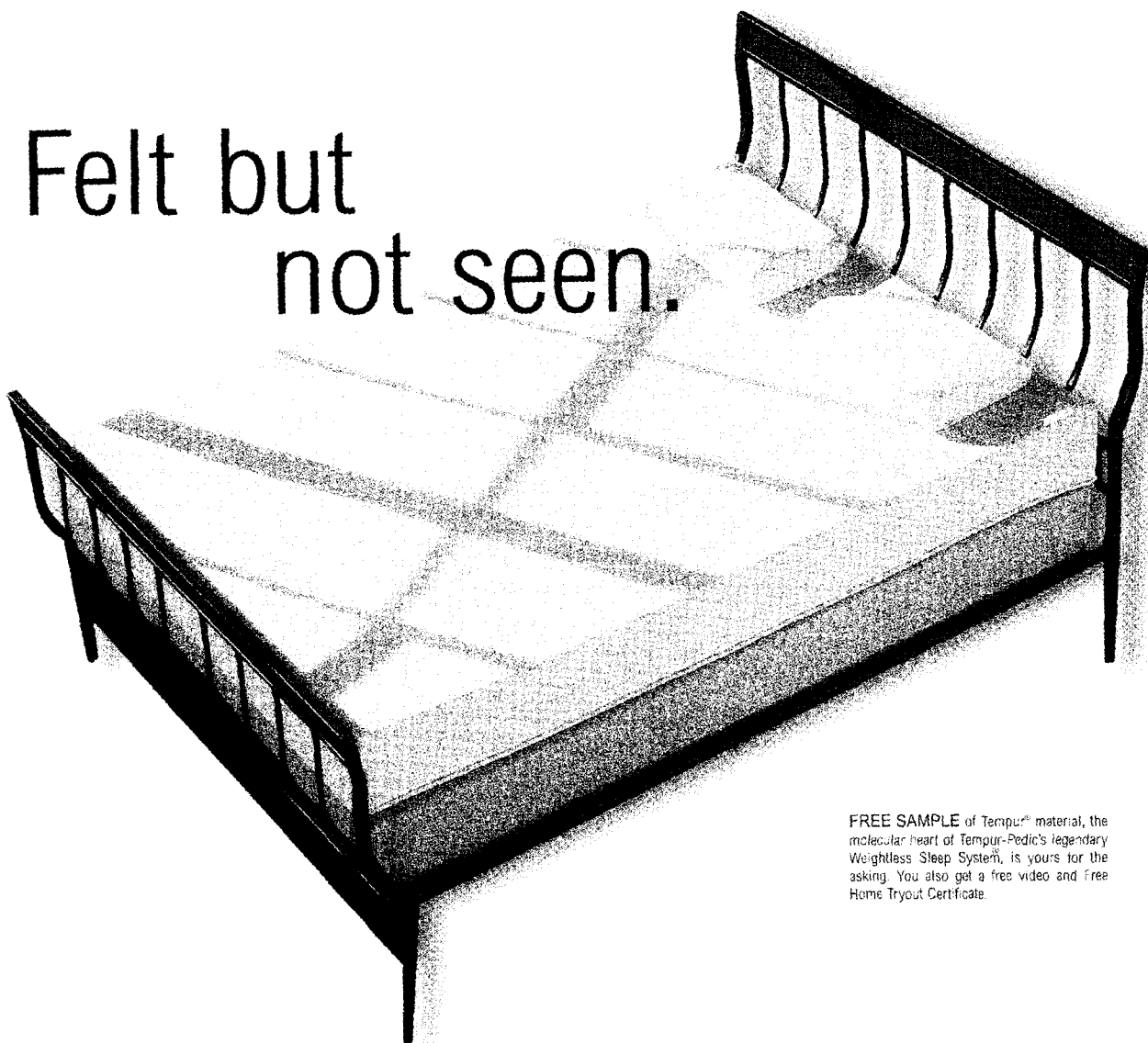
yield rate, is 30 percent. Because of its binding ED program it can report an overall yield of 40 percent. Amherst has a 34 percent open-market yield, but it can report a 42 percent yield because of binding ED. For Columbia the percentages are 41 and 58, for Yale 55 and 66.

The long-term financial viability of a college can be influenced simply by its reported yield. “I was flabbergasted when we were having our college bonds evaluated by Moody’s and S&P,” Bruce Poch, of Pomona, told me. “These bond raters were obsessing about our yield! They were chastising me because Pomona’s yield was not as high as Williams’s and Amherst’s, because they took more of their class early. We explained that our regular-decision yield was quite high, and finally got a triple-A bond rating. Obviously there were other considerations, but this saved the college millions in interest.” One admissions dean at a selective school proudly told me that his school’s yield had risen from 50 to 60 percent in just three years. He didn’t add what his college’s own figures show: the yield for regular admissions had been steady in that time. The difference came from the school’s having taken more students early.

The average SAT score of the admitted class is another important element in ranking. The admissions office can affect this directly, by giving SAT scores extra weight in its decisions—and surprising new evidence suggests that many offices are doing so. The main professional organization in this field, the National Association for College Admission Counseling, reported last February that the one factor that had become *more* important in admissions decisions over the past decade was SAT scores. “College presidents see these *U.S. News* rankings,” Mark Davis, a college counselor at Phillips Exeter Academy, told me recently, “and they tell the deans of admission, ‘Keep those SAT scores up! Not because we think they’re that relevant but because we don’t want to slip in the rankings.’”

The most intriguing twist on the SAT emphasis is applied at Georgetown, one of a handful of schools still offering nonbinding early action. Whereas Harvard knows that nearly all the students admitted EA will enroll, Georgetown knows that most of the academically strongest candidates it admits early will end up at Yale or Stanford if they get in. Georgetown sticks with EA in part because Charles Deacon, its dean of admissions, is a prominent critic of the increased use of binding programs and the sense of panic and scarcity they create among students. (My wife, Deborah, worked for him in Georgetown’s admissions office for two years.) But Georgetown also benefits from the fact that its nonbinding program attracts applications from some talented students who start out considering the university a “safety school” but end up deciding to enroll. Because colleges often highlight the average SAT scores of the students they admit, not just the ones who enroll, a policy like Georgetown’s can make a school look better.

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THE THREE AGES OF EARLY DECISION

Today's ED programs are relics of an entirely different era in academic history—actually, two eras. The first rough precursors of today's early system appeared in the 1950s, when Harvard, Yale, and Princeton applied what was known as the ABC system. Their admissions officers would visit Exeter, Groton, Andover, and the other traditional feeder schools. They would chat with students, talk with counselors, and look at transcripts, and then issue advisory A, B, or C ratings to the students. A was a likely admission, B was possible, C was unlikely. "It was a system that gave students from certain backgrounds a lot of access," Karl Furstenberg says. "It reflected the privileged relationships that existed."

By the late 1950s smaller New England colleges had come up with the first early-decision plans, as a way to make inroads with these same students. Amherst, Bowdoin, Dartmouth, Wesleyan, and Williams, allied at the time as "the Pentagonals," offered what has become the familiar bargain: better odds on admission in return for a binding commitment to attend. "What's interesting is that from the start competitive considerations among colleges seem to have been the driving force," Karl Furstenberg, of Dartmouth, says. Soon after, other colleges began to adopt early decision.

The next distinct phase came during the baby bust of the 1980s, when binding commitments were a way to fill dormitory beds. With fewer students applying each year, even proud, strong schools found themselves digging deep into their waiting lists to fill their freshman classes. Smaller, weaker colleges could barely make their numbers and pay their bills—no matter how deep they dug. "It's not shameful to go to the waiting list, but you don't want to make yourself look needy," says Jonathan Reider, formerly of Stanford. "For an institution like Stanford, taking sixty would be a lot."

During the baby bust news swept through the small-college ranks that Swarthmore had not been able to fill its class without nearly using up its waiting list. "I think that got people really worried," says Edward Hu, who was then an admissions officer at Occidental College and is now a counselor at the Harvard-Westlake school. "If *Swarthmore* was having these problems ..." In the early 1990s the main computer in Brown's admissions office broke down: the office had been using a three-digit code for places on the waiting list, and anxious admissions officers were packing so many names onto the list that they had exceeded the 999-name limit in the database system.

In the mid-1990s Baby Boomers' children began applying to college, and the long years of prosperity expanded the pool of people willing and able to pay tuition for prep schools and private colleges. More bodies and more money were coming into the college system at just the moment when American colleges were going through their version of economic globalization. Fred Hargadon, formerly the

dean of admissions at Stanford and now in the same position at Princeton, says, "A generation ago most students stayed within two hundred miles of their home town when looking at colleges." Now, in education as in other fields, customers from around the country and the world were bidding for the same limited resources.

The economists Robert Frank, of Cornell, and Philip Cook, of Duke, have called this the "winner take all" phenomenon, in that it multiplies the rewards for those at the top of the pyramid and puts new pressure on those at the bottom. Frank has used the example of the market for opera. A century ago dozens of cities had their own opera houses, providing work for hundreds of singers. Now everyone buys CD recordings of the same few world-famous sopranos. Similar effects are visible in the college market. A worldwide sense that U.S. higher education was pre-eminent, and a growing perception within America that a clear hierarchy of "best" colleges existed, made top schools relatively more attractive than they had been before. Harvard, Yale, and Princeton became more sought after relative to other very selective schools. Harvard became clearly the first among equals, on the basis of the selectivity and yield statistics that are stressed in rankings. Harvard's open-market yield is now above 60 percent, which when combined with the near 90 percent yield from its nonbinding early-action program gives Harvard an overall yield of 79 percent. Few colleges have an open-market yield of even 50 percent.

Meanwhile, schools less well known or well positioned were applying a version of Penn's strategy, deliberately using the early option to improve their numbers and allure. "In general it's the smaller liberal-arts colleges that need to encourage applications, so that they'll remain 'selective,'" says John Katzman, the head of The Princeton Review. Katzman says that it's unfair to name any schools that pursue this strategy, because "it's like naming people who jaywalk in New York." But the counselors I spoke with volunteered some examples of smaller, mainly private schools that had placed increasing emphasis on early plans to lock up their freshman class. These included Brandeis, Connecticut College, Emory, Tufts, Washington University in St. Louis, and Wesleyan. The Claremont Colleges, in southern California, were often cited as an exception to the trend.

Tulane is one of several schools that have been inventive with early plans. It now offers both early-action and early-decision plans. Last year it sent a mailing to all students in Louisiana and to high-scoring students from across the country. The mailing included admissions forms already filled out with basic data about each student, which Tulane had bought from the Educational Testing Service and the College Board. Admissions fees were waived for students who used the form. Because of the new forms and other factors that made Tulane more attractive, applications went up by 30 percent. It therefore became more "selective."

THE HIGH ROAD

There is a case to be made for the rise of early-decision programs, and Fred Hargadon enjoys making it. Hargadon resisted early programs of any sort during the fifteen years he was the admissions director at Stanford; six years ago he oversaw Princeton's switch to a binding ED plan. He takes great and eloquent offense at the idea that admissions policies should be described as a matter of power politics among colleges rather than as efforts to find the best match of student and school. When I met with him at Princeton recently, I mentioned that high school counselors often describe the increase in early programs as an "arms race" in which no one can afford to back down. That night I got a lengthy e-mail from him saying that the analogy reminded him of "how narrow and shallow are the frames of reference often used by people in order to give an immediate response or reaction to one or another happening in higher education."

Hargadon's argument for a binding ED policy is in part positive: ED gives an admissions office the best chance to assemble some of the diverse talents, range of backgrounds, and personalities necessary to make up a well-rounded class. "If we need a quarterback for the football team and we've admitted two of them early, we don't need to take a third in the spring," he says. "If you're doing it in the spring, you have no idea who's actually going to show up." And his case is in part negative, or at least defensive. When it had a nonbinding early plan, Princeton could end up wasting its decision-making time and, worse, its scarce admission slots on students who were hoping to get into Yale or Harvard. "To put it as bluntly as I can," Hargadon said in a long note he had prepared before our talk,

Early Decision seems to me to be the most "rational" part of the admissions process these days. To be able to admit precisely the kinds of students we seek from among those who have decided that Princeton is where they want to be is far more "rational" than the weeks we spend in late March making hairline decisions among terrific kids without the slightest knowledge of who among them really wants the particular opportunities provided by Princeton and who among them could care less or, worse, who among them is simply collecting trophies.

Richard Shaw, the admissions dean at Yale, defends his institution's ED policy in similar terms. Under the old system, he told me, trophy-hunting students would "collect a lot of

admissions from places that were not their first choice, and would take up the space that might have gone to other students." It was fairer, he said, to reserve the institutions' scarce decision-making time for students who really wanted to attend Yale.

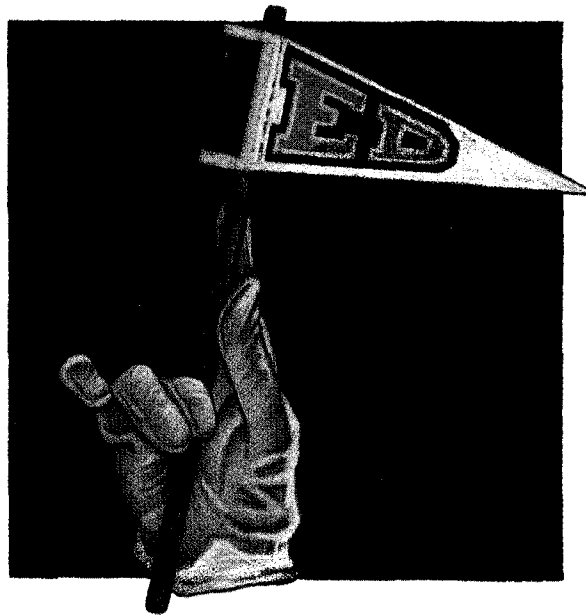
High school counselors, most of whom take a dim overall view of early decision (but also master its nuances in order to get the right edge for their students), admit that for some students in some circumstances it can work just right. Yet not one of the more than thirty public and private school counselors I spoke with argued that because the early system is good for particular students, or because they had learned how to work it, it is beneficial overall. On the contrary, they had three basic complaints: that it distorts the experience of being in high school; that it worsens the professional-class neurosis about college admission; and that in terms of social class it is nakedly unfair.

Early decision distorts high school mainly by fore-

shortening the experience. With early applications due in the fall of senior year, students know that the end of junior year is the last part of their high school record that "counts." The other dates on the college-prep calendar must also be moved up. In the past five years the Kaplan company has seen a 60 percent rise in demand for its courses in the PSAT, the warm-up for the SAT. "These kids need to get started so they can get their SATs finished by the end of their junior year," Seppy Basili, of Kaplan, says.

"With this speeded-up process there's pressure on kids to be perfect from ninth grade on," says Josh Wolman, the director of college counseling at Sidwell Friends School, in Washington, D.C. "We've got colleges saying 'Well, we don't know, he had a C in biology in ninth grade.' I wish colleges had a better understanding of what it's like to work with ninth-graders. If they think all ninth-graders can get *As*—that all ninth-grade boys can get *As*!—they're crazy."

"A hallmark of adolescence is its changeability," says Cigus Vanni, formerly an assistant dean at Swarthmore. "To say that kids should be ready a year ahead of time to make these decisions goes against everything we've learned in the past hundred years." Tom Parker, the admissions director at Amherst, oversees an ED plan but nonetheless says that too many colleges are taking too many students early: "My own fundamental belief is that eight to twelve months in a seventeen-year-old's life is a very long time. For us it's a blink of an eye. Kids may begin the year with the idea of



going to a large urban university and end up very happy to come to Amherst. They do so as a result of insight, growth, challenge, and family dynamics, and we really need to allow those things to play out. An awful lot of kids are making the decision too early because they feel that they can't get in if they don't."

I spoke with students at a variety of high schools about how the college-admissions process had affected them. By the end of the process most of them were battle-hardened and blasé, and not really interested in talking about what they had been through. The answer I remember best came from a sophomore at Harvard-Westlake, Tom Newman, a curly-haired, open-faced boy. How early did students start worrying about college?

"Oh, yeah, for us as sophomores, it's here," he said. "Especially at a school like this, to a very large extent we start feeling the pressure of getting ready for college from ninth grade on. It's on our minds that tenth grade and eleventh grade count. So there's always the big stress level. They start talking to us about colleges before sophomore year starts—I think we had an orientation in late summer after our freshman year. They sat us down and said, 'This is it. The life you're going to be living for the next few years.'"

I asked if he thought he would apply early decision when his time came. "Most people are for that, to be perfectly honest. They say you have a better chance. Most of the seniors I know have done early admission, and most of the sophomores are thinking about it."

Then I asked Newman if he thought the early focus on college had helped or hurt his high school experience. He laughed. "Are you *serious*? Maybe for a very small percentage it might help them do better. But for the great majority, no. It makes things more stressful, more painful. You go around the school and see the kids look tired. Very few students get enough sleep. They get either too much or not enough exercise. We don't go for moderation—you can't, because the hype is so high." He was saying this not in a whiny, tortured-youth fashion but as an observer of his culture.

Candace Andrews, a college counselor at the Polytechnic School, in Pasadena, California, says that she tries not to speak to freshmen or sophomores about college at all, but the parents are always at her. "I tell the parents, 'You want your kid to go to Stanford? Then let your kid have a real Poly life. Engage *here*.'" In theory that's how high school, not to mention life in general, is supposed to work. But Andrews says that the pressure to get kids on the college chute has become too great. (She is leaving the counseling business to enter a more relaxed field—nuclear-weapons control.)

At the schools I visited—strong suburban public schools and renowned private schools—half of all seniors, on average, applied under some early plan. Of those, typically half applied under binding early-decision plans, and half under nonbinding early action. All the counselors I spoke with said that if it were up to the parents alone, the overall total

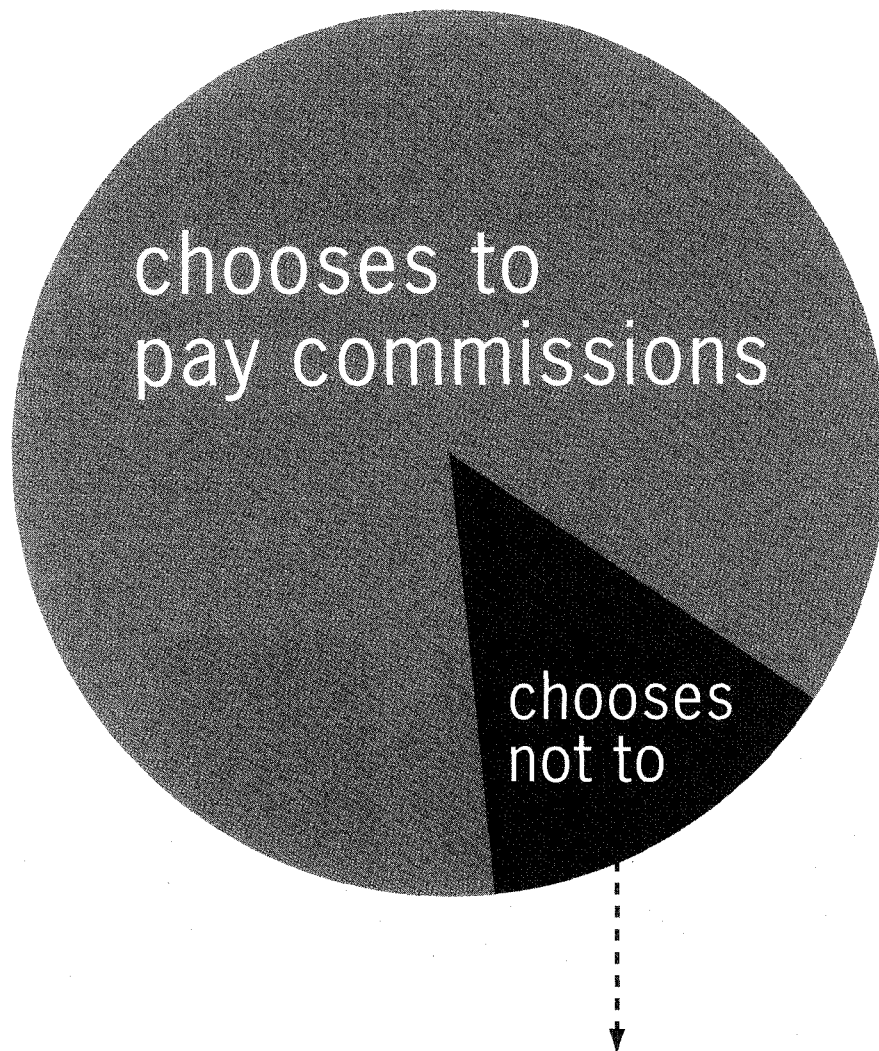
would be much higher. This was true even at Scarsdale High, in New York, where 70 percent of the seniors applied under some early program. "They're scared," Cigus Vanni says, referring mainly to parents. "The sense is that New York, say, has a lot of high-scoring, high-achieving kids, and if they wait for the regular pool, the students will eliminate one another." At Harvard-Westlake, Edward Hu and his colleagues keep the early proportion to 50 percent by insisting that students and parents work through a checklist. Sample question: "Have you visited the college that you like more than any other college? Yes or No. If Yes, continue. If No, stop. You are not applying early."

This question alone suggests the most glaring defect of the early programs: how much they are biased toward privileged students. It makes perfect sense that students should see a college before making a binding commitment to attend. A school like Harvard-Westlake, on the West Coast, can assume that its students will have made the East Coast college tour before their senior year. Counselors at the Los Angeles public schools cannot—that is, if they even have a moment to think about which of their students should apply early. At the typical private school or prosperous suburban public high school one counselor may serve forty to sixty students. At Redlands High, the public high school I attended in southern California, each counselor is responsible for several hundred students. Rich and poor students alike may be free to benefit from today's ED racket—but only the rich are likely to have heard of it.

"You can always argue for taking one more kid in the early stage," Jonathan Reider says, referring to his time as an admissions officer at Stanford. "There's always room to go from four hundred and fifty to four fifty-one. So you'd end up with four eighty. One year we went over five hundred. But you get to March, and you generally know what the yield on the regular kids will be, and you simply can't take another kid." Students who haven't heard of early decision are shouldered out.

Others who are left out are those whose parents wonder how they're going to pay for college, which is to say average Americans. A student who applies under the regular system can compare loans, grants, and work-study offers from a variety of schools. A student who is accepted early decision has to take whatever aid the college offers. Colleges swear that in making need-based aid calculations they don't discriminate against early applicants. That may well be true at the richest two or three schools. But even when that is the case, a student with only one offer on the table cannot know what might have been available elsewhere.

Charles Deacon, of Georgetown, says, "A cynical view is that early decision is a programmatic way of rationing your financial aid. First, the ED pool is more affluent, so you spend less money"—that is, give less need-based aid—"enrolling your class. And then there is absolutely no need to compete on financial packages. I am dealing with a very attractive



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candidate right now, admitted in our nonbinding program, who is comparing our aid package with"—and here he named a famous East Coast school that has a binding early-decision plan. That school, he said, had just come up with an offer that was all grant, no loan. "If she had applied there early decision, they wouldn't have had to do that."

"The whole early-decision thing is so preposterous, transparent, and demeaning to the profession that it is bound to go bust," says Tom Parker, of Amherst. "I can't think of one secondary school counselor who sees the benefit of the program."

THE RULES OF THE GAME— HOW TO WORK THEM AND HOW TO REFORM THEM

For students now entering their senior year in high school, and for their parents, changing the ED system is a moot point. The system exists, and it rewards those who are willing to play the game. The main strategy is this: a student who is in the right position to make an early commitment has every reason to do so.

For a student, being in that position means being absolutely certain by the start of the senior year that Wesleyan or Bates or Columbia is *the* place one wants to attend, and that there will be no "buyer's remorse" later in the year when classmates get four or five offers to choose from. It means having strong grades and SAT scores by the end of junior year and not thinking that one's record needs to be rounded off or enriched by senior-year performance. It means that one's family has enough money to be unaffected by the possibility of competitive financial offers. It means that one has decided not to apply for the extraordinary full-tuition "merit" scholarships—including the Trustee Scholar program at the University of Southern California and the Morehead scholarships at the University of North Carolina—that are increasingly being used to attract talented students to less selective schools. It means that one is emotionally prepared to deal with a rejection if necessary and then to rush regular applications into the mail right away.

Anyone so positioned should go right ahead. Those who aren't should take their time. There are, of course, nuances. Students hoping for but not confident of Princeton or Stanford in the regular cycle, for instance, should apply early to Georgetown—what is there to lose? Those thinking seriously of Harvard might as well apply early: there is no evi-

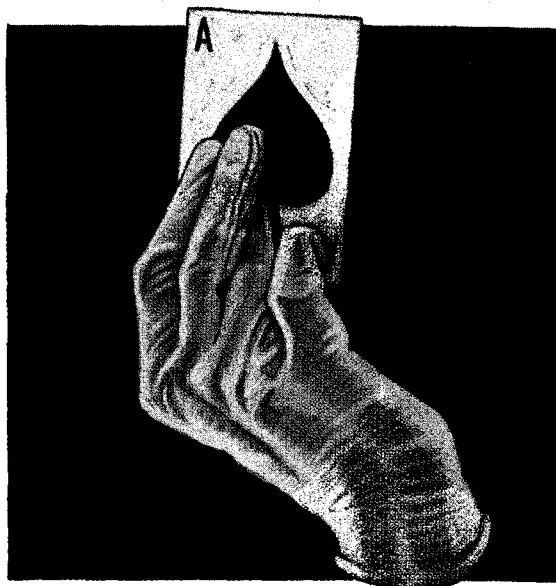
dence that it's easier to get in then, but with most of the class being admitted early, it's a way to resolve uncertainties ahead of time. Anyone hoping to use legacy preference or athletic talent for an extra edge should apply early.

Those are some of the ways to work the system. What about changing it? One approach would be simple reform—accepting the inevitability of ED programs but trying to modify them so as to reduce the attendant pressure and paranoia. For instance, colleges could agree to abandon the practice sometimes called sophomore search, whereby the Educational Testing Service sells mailing lists of high school sophomores to colleges so that the schools can begin their marketing mailings in the junior year. High school counselors could agitate for a commitment from colleges that financial-aid offers would be consistent for early and regular applicants; the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) could carefully monitor trends to see that colleges honored the pledge. High schools and colleges alike could agree to report either more or less data than they currently do.

If more, then colleges would carefully distinguish between early and regular applicants when reporting their selectivity and yield rates. This would reduce the pressure to take more early applicants in order to improve statistics. *U.S. News* should ask for, and separately report, early and regular totals for selectivity and yield. If a school refuses to provide a breakdown, the magazine should omit selectivity and yield from the school's listing.

If less, then colleges could reduce the detailed information they release about admissions trends. Fred Hargadon, of Princeton, says he dreams of returning to the days when not even students were informed of their SAT scores and when colleges didn't advertise the median test scores of their entering classes. Barbara Leifer-Sarullo and Marjorie Jacobs, of Scarsdale High, have for years declined to give local papers lists of the colleges Scarsdale graduates will be attending. "If we did that," Leifer-Sarullo says, "the school next door would be under that much more pressure about its graduates—and school results are what keep up real-estate prices." Scarsdale's strong reputation means that it can afford not to be on lists of schools with the most Ivy League admissions.

To begin thinking about proposals for reform is to realize both how difficult the changes would be to implement and how indirect their effects might be. One such proposal could be called the "anti-trophy-hunting rule." At Scarsdale



High students who have been accepted to very selective colleges under early action may submit at most one other application during the regular cycle. This avoids swamping the system in general and crowding out other applicants from the same secondary school. (In practice it largely keeps people with an early acceptance at Harvard from clogging the system at Princeton, Yale, and Stanford.) Edward Hu, of Harvard-Westlake, proposes another idea. He says that no student should apply to college until *after* high school graduation, with the expectation that most would spend the next year working, traveling, or volunteering. Great idea—good luck!

Two other proposals sound sensible but also indicate the limits of reform. One is that colleges voluntarily do what Stanford does now and hold early admissions to no more than 25 percent of the incoming class. “I really would find it problematic to give out more than a quarter of our admissions decisions early,” Robin Mamlet, the admissions dean at Stanford, says, voicing a view different from Hargadon’s. “Certainly I feel that when you pass a third, you limit your ability to maneuver as an institution, and it’s not healthy on a national level.” Some counselors told me they support such a ceiling because they support anything that will reduce the volume of early acceptances. Others think a widely accepted ceiling could actually make things worse, by enforcing the idea that early admission is a sign of super-elite status.

The other proposal is that Harvard be pressured to adopt a binding ED program. The logic here is that Harvard’s current nonbinding program is de facto binding, and the fiction that it’s not encourages trophy-hunting students to waste the time of admissions officers at half a dozen other schools. But Harvard has no intention of making this change.

The problem with reform, then, is that most measures would have a very limited effect, and those whose effect might be greater—for instance, a year’s delay—are unlikely to be taken. This leads many counselors to dream about a different approach: a basic assault on the current college-admissions mania.

IMMEDIATE SUSPENSION

Today’s professional-class madness about college involves the linked ideas that colleges are desirable to the extent that they are hard to get into; that high schools are valuable to the extent that they get students into those desirable colleges; and that being accepted or rejected from a “good” college is the most consequential fact about one’s education.

Viewed from afar—or from close up, by people working in high schools—every part of this outlook is twisted. The U.S. higher-education network is remarkable precisely for how many people it accommodates, how many different avenues it opens, how many second chances it offers, and how thoroughly it is *not* the last word on success or failure.

Obviously there are name and network payoffs from attending the “best” colleges and graduate schools. Four of the nine justices on the current Supreme Court have undergraduate degrees from Stanford. The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania has a powerful network in finance, the Harvard *Crimson* in journalism, the USC film school in Hollywood, Stanford’s computer-science department in Silicon Valley, *The Dartmouth Review* among conservative writers, and so on.

But the positive effects of these networks are certainly far less than the negative effects of not attending the University of Tokyo in Japan or one of the *grandes écoles* in France. The longer a field is exposed to a continuing market test—of economic profit, of political approval, of performance or innovation—the less academic credentials of any sort seem to matter. The four richest people in America, all of whom made rather than inherited their wealth, are a dropout from Harvard, a dropout from the University of Illinois, a dropout from Washington State University, and a graduate of the University of Nebraska. American Presidents of the past half century have included two from Yale; two from the service academies; one each from Harvard, Southwest Texas State, Whittier, Michigan, Eureka, and Georgetown; and one (Harry Truman) with no college degree. Members of Congress are, on average, unusually wealthy but not from elite-college backgrounds. Rosters of Nobel laureates or top leaders in any industrial field demonstrate that admission to a selective school is not necessary for success. Twenty-fifth-anniversary alumni reports from Harvard, Yale, or Princeton make clear that a degree from one of the Big Three is not sufficient for success or wealth or happiness. A counselor at Scarsdale High asks students to research and write about three to five people they consider genuinely successful—and then stresses to the students how little connection each success has to college background.

Other things being equal, a degree from a better-known college is a plus—as are good looks, white skin, athletic skill, being raised in an intact family, and other factors that skew the starting line in life. But more than these other variables, the importance of one’s college background diminishes rapidly through adulthood: it matters most for one’s first job and steadily less thereafter. The old grad who parades his college background does so because that’s when he peaked in life. Yes, American parents wanting to give their child a fighting chance should make sure that he or she has some sort of college degree. The wonder is that getting through the admissions gate at a name-brand college should have come to seem the fundamental point of upper-middle-class child-rearing.

The drive to get children into one of the most selective schools may in fact be economically irrational if parents think that the money they spend on private school tuition will pay off in higher future earnings for those children. For years scholars have attempted to measure the economic

impact of attending a selective college versus a less selective one. Isolating that impact has been difficult, because students who go to selective schools tend to have many other things working in their favor. But in a widely quoted 1999 working paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research, Stacy Berg Dale and Alan B. Krueger found that the economic benefit of attending a more selective school was negligible. (To be specific, they compared a group of students who had enrolled in the most-selective schools that admitted them with another group that had been admitted to similar schools but decided to enroll in less-selective ones. The selectivity of a school made no significant difference in the students' later earnings.) The same study found some payoff to attending expensive schools. But nearly all private colleges, selective or not, cost much more than nearly all public institutions—and there is only a vague connection between out-of-pocket expense for tuition and housing and perceived selectivity.

So although the pressure for places in the Ivy League and the exclusive liberal-arts colleges does not grow purely from economic rationality, it obviously has economic consequences. Preparing students for SATs and related tests is the basis of The Princeton Review's and Kaplan's success. Private schools remain crowded because so many parents view them more as valuable conduits to selective colleges than as valuable educational experiences.

Colleges, says Mark Davis, of Exeter, have achieved a miracle of marketing: "The miracle of scarcity. By making themselves harder to get into, they have made themselves 'better' in the public eye." Davis readily admits that elite prep schools like his benefit from this outlook. Many other things, too, are valued largely because they are scarce, but admission to an elite college is different from, say, beachfront property or original artwork, because it can't be bought directly. Thus the intensity with which parents approach the indirect factors that make admission more likely: prep schools, private tutoring for admissions tests, extensive travel, "interesting" summer experiences.

There is one other hope for dealing with the early-decision problem—a step significant enough to make a real difference, but sufficiently contained to happen in less than geologic time: adopting what might be called the Joe Allen Memorial Policy, suspending early programs of all sorts for the indefinite future.

Joseph P. Allen, a boyish-looking man then in his mid-forties, became the director of admissions at the University of Southern California in 1993, moving from the same job at UC Santa Cruz. USC, like Penn, was a private institution with an unenviable reputation, because of its location in a dicey part of Los Angeles and because it was seen as a safety school for rich but unmotivated students. Like Penn, USC waged an aggressive campaign to improve its image. Allen was the most visible public ambassador of the drive,

traveling the country to recruit talented students, urging the creation of new honors programs, and raising money for scholarships that brought a wider racial diversity to what had been a mainly white student body. By the late 1990s USC had nine times as many applicants as places; the average SAT score of incoming freshman classes had risen by 300 points; and the university had moved up in the *U.S. News* rankings.

Allen, who had spent a year in federal prison in the early 1970s for refusing the draft for Vietnam, considered early programs economically unfair, and resisted using them as part of USC's recruiting drive. But as he watched their influence spread, he began to fear that no institution could avoid them in the long run. At a meeting of the College Board in February, 1998, he stood up and offered a "modest proposal." For years, he said, he had heard colleagues worry about the effects of early-decision programs. Many people thought that students had to make up their minds far too early. All of them realized that binding ED programs allowed schools to feign a level of selectivity they don't really have. But individual schools felt powerless to do anything about it. "We'd give it up—if everyone else did," Allen had often heard. Therefore, he suggested, why didn't everyone give up early programs altogether? Why not just declare a moratorium? He proposed a three-year ban on all ED and EA programs, during which time colleges and high schools would carefully observe the effects.

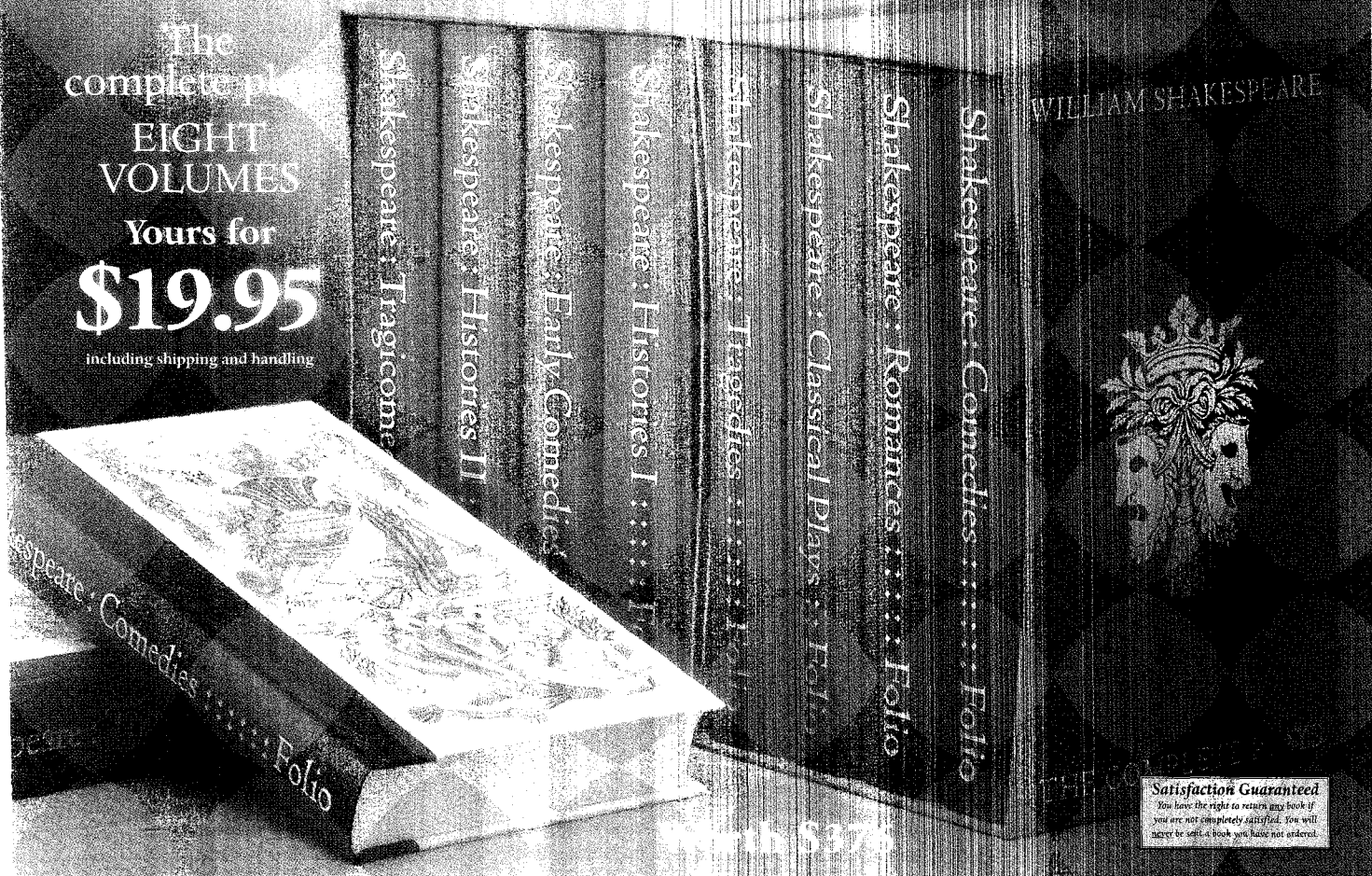
At that meeting some people supported the plan and others said it was impractical. Over the next few years Allen brought up the idea whenever his colleagues began complaining about the effects of ED programs. Then, in March of this year, Allen suffered a stroke while greeting a group of prospective USC students. He was fifty-three years old and apparently vigorous, but he died two weeks later.

Candace Andrews, of the Polytechnic School, who had known and liked Allen, told me, "In Joe Allen's memory we should give his proposal a try. No one wants to be the first one to take the step, so everyone needs to step back together." She tossed off this idea casually in conversation, but it actually seems more promising than any of the other reform plans. Not every college would agree to it, of course. Fortunately, though, the same hierarchy that skews the system could make a difference here. If the right few colleges agreed, that could be enough. When I asked high school counselors how many colleges it would take to change early programs by agreeing to a moratorium, their answers varied. A few thought that Harvard by itself was enough. "It's all about Harvard, it really is," Mark Davis, of Exeter, told me. "If they didn't have an early program, then others would feel comfortable following suit." Harvard's officials claim that no one college can afford to go it alone. "You've got to understand, the Ivy League is so hypercompetitive that I've heard our faculty members compare it to a loose federation of pirates,"

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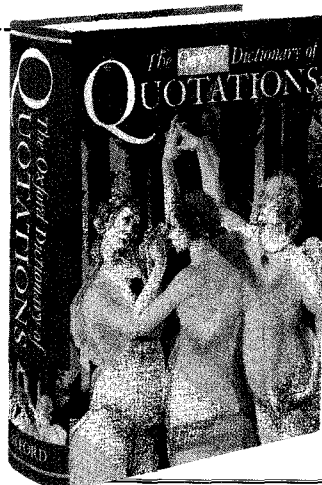
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William Fitzsimmons says. "If we gave it up, other institutions inside and outside the Ivy League would carve up our class, and our faculty would carve us up." Tom Parker, of Amherst, says, "The places that would have to change are Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, Penn. Those are the four. If they were to drastically reduce the percentage they take early, this would all change in a heartbeat." Joanna Schultz, the director of college counseling at The Ellis School, a private school for girls in Pittsburgh, says, "It might take the Ivy League. If those eight colleges made a decision, others at that level would have to follow." Other counselors and admissions officers had various ideas about the schools necessary to make the

LIMITS

So high
in their leafy silence
over Kells, over Durrow,
as the Vikings
raged south—
the old monks
made the alphabet
wild:
 they dipped iron
into azure and
indigo: they gave strange
wings to their *os*
and *es*: their vowels
clung on with
talons and the thin
ribbed wolves
that had gone north
left their frozen winters
and were lured back
to their consonants.

—EAVAN BOLAND

difference: Stanford, the University of Chicago, Swarthmore, Amherst, Johns Hopkins, Georgetown, Rice.

But whatever the difference in details, everyone I spoke with seemed sure that some small group of elite colleges could change the system. And almost all the high school counselors thought that high school students as a whole would be much better off, even if some of their own students would no longer have the inside track.

So here is my proposal: Take the ten most selective national universities and have them agree to conduct only regular admissions programs for the next five years. No early decision, no early action. Based on percentages of applicants who are admitted (early and regular combined), those ten are Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, Stanford, Yale, Brown, Cal Tech, MIT, Dartmouth, and Georgetown. Collectively their image is secure enough that in the years it might take others to go along, they needn't worry about seeing their classes carved up from below. The desire to emulate them is great enough that other schools could eventually be either shamed or flattered into adopting their policy. These ten are all private schools, so no cumbersome delay would arise from the need for state approval. (The next ten most selective, which include some public universities, are the University of Pennsylvania, Rice, the University of California at Berkeley, Duke, the University of California at Los Angeles, New York University, Northwestern, Tufts, Cornell, and Johns Hopkins.)

Five years would be long enough to move today's eighth-graders all the way through high school under the expectation of a regular admissions cycle, and then to see how their experience differed. If most of today's high school counselors are right, early plans would soon be clearly seen for what they have become: a crutch for college administrations, and an unfortunate strategy for lower-ranked schools to make themselves look better. If after five years schools for some reason missed the early system, they could return to it with a clearer sense of why they were doing so.

"In an ideal world we would do away with all early programs," Fitzsimmons said when I asked him about the right long-term direction for admissions systems. "We'd go back to the days when everyone could look at all their options over the senior year. Students, parents, and high schools would be very grateful. Philosophically and in every other way it would be so much better if we all could make the change."

Because of Harvard's position in today's college pyramid, Fitzsimmons is the most influential person in American college admissions. His "ideal world" is significant news. What holds him back is the need to know that other schools will lower their guns if he lowers his. Are college students wondering what to protest next? The out-of-control ED system is my nominee. Today's students, who survived this distorted game, could do their younger brothers and sisters an enormous favor by pressuring those ten schools to do what they already know is right. ■

CONFESSIONS OF A PREP SCHOOL COLLEGE COUNSELOR

Our author looks at books about college admissions—and at the unexamined prejudices fueling the “elite” college admissions frenzy

BY CAITLIN FLANAGAN

Illustrations by Steve Brodner

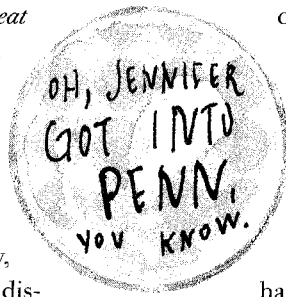
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Several years ago I was teaching *The Great Gatsby* to a class of eleventh-graders at Harvard-Westlake, a private school in Los Angeles. We began our discussion with a consideration of Tom and Daisy Buchanan. The students more or less understood Daisy. These were teenagers from Beverly Hills and Brentwood and Encino, kids for whom Daisy, with her particular collection of pleasures and discontents, her fluttering dress and her voice like money, was not entirely beyond the realm of experience. Tom was another matter.

“What’s he like?” I asked. A hand shot up: “He’s highly intelligent.” I looked at the boy who said this with some puzzlement. He had just read the chapter in which Tom sputters out the theories—“scientific stuff”—that he has gleaned from a book called *The Rise of the Colored Empires*, among them that “it’s up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things.” This is not the sort of opinion with which children from Beverly Hills and Brentwood and Encino tend to be sympathetic.

“What makes you think he’s so smart?” I asked. The boy replied, “Because he went to Yale.” I burst out laughing and then gave the class a little lecture regarding the way that Ivy League schools have changed in the past several decades—about what a Yale degree suggested about someone fifty years ago as opposed to what it suggests today. That despite the current admissions crunch there are still plenty of nimrods collecting Yale diplomas was a life lesson I decided to let them learn out in the field.

A couple of years later, when I became a college counselor at the school, I was introduced to such odd and inexplicable notions about colleges that I felt nostalgic for the good old days of explaining that holding a Yale degree doesn’t make Tom Buchanan a genius. I had assumed, naively, that the new job would be easy. By every objective measure our students were among the best-prepared for



college in North America; in a typical year a quarter of the class attends either an Ivy League school or Stanford University. More impressive, the ones from the bitter bottom of the class were going off to colleges that most high school seniors can only dream about.

I had no idea what I was in for—no idea that the confident, buoyant students for whom I’d had such great affection when I encountered them in the classroom would so often turn into complete neurotics the moment they crossed the threshold of the college-counseling office. Or that their parents, who had always been lovely and appreciative when I was teaching their children, would become irritable and demanding once I was helping them all select a college. Granted, every year there were families who impressed me with their good cheer and resourcefulness in the face of the thorny admissions climate. But invariably a core group seemed to be teetering on the brink of emotional collapse. What I was observing, I later discovered, was a common phenomenon among the families of college-bound students of a certain social class, one aptly described by the psychologist Michael Thompson in a justly famous 1990 essay titled “College Admission as a Failed Rite of Passage.” College admissions, Thompson wrote, “can make normal people act nutty, and nutty people act quite crazy.” Bingo. I had inherited a Rolodex full of useful phone numbers (the College Board, a helpful counselor in the UCLA admissions office), but the number I kept handing out was that of a family therapist. “Maybe he could help you a bit,” I would say gently after yet another unexpectedly combustive family meeting. I could have understood the forceful nature of the families’ emotions if the stakes had been higher. If the child had a single shot at a scholarship and a college education, and a letter of rejection meant that he or she would lead a fundamentally different life—that was a situation I could imagine being rife with heartache and regret. But when the sting of a Bowdoin rejection was lessened (the same day) by the salve of a

Colby acceptance, when a rejection from Dartmouth meant the student would be off to Penn—where was the horror? If a family had the wherewithal to send a beloved and supremely well prepared child off to one of the hundred or so first-rate colleges in America, the resources to offer a semester abroad, the connections necessary to facilitate a wonderful summer internship in New York or Hollywood or Costa Rica, and the ability to bankroll, without blinking, all of graduate school, then what was the source of these unstoppable tears?

Each of the hot hundred colleges held a certain position in a vast and inscrutable cosmology that only the students and their parents seemed to understand. The very names of schools I had always considered excellent made many students shudder—Kenyon, for example. They would snap briskly to attention if I said “Williams” or “Amherst.” So why not Kenyon?

On the other hand, schools that I had never considered particularly dazzling turned out to be white-hot centers of the universe. In vast, high-achieving droves, for example, these kids wanted to go to Duke. Fine, but here’s where I couldn’t figure them out: they were dying to go to Duke, but Chapel Hill left them cold. Why? They couldn’t put it into words exactly; it was as inexplicable and irreducible as falling in love. They would do whatever it took to get themselves to Duke—enroll in as many AP classes as they could, stuff their heads full of Robert Lowell poems and differential equations and plein air paintings, invest untold, unrecoverable hours cramming for standardized tests that a growing number of admissions experts hope to abolish altogether.

Certainly, I understood why students who had worked so hard and done so well would want to go to schools like Harvard and Princeton, but many places seem to be prestigious simply because student fads and crazes have made them hard to get into. Brazenly capitalizing on the whims and passions of teenagers seems a questionable practice for institutions dedicated, in part, to the well-being of young people. Here’s how Rachel Toor describes her former job as an admissions officer at Duke in her new book, *Admissions Confidential*:

I travel around the country whipping kids (and their parents) into a frenzy so that they will apply. I tell them how great a school Duke is academically and how much fun they will have socially. Then, come April, we reject most of them.

The university devotes a considerable amount of money and effort to recruiting BWRKs (“bright, well-rounded kids”) only because denying them boosts the school’s selectivity rating. Although Toor seems disillusioned by the task of pumping up application rates, she also seems to believe that some measure of a school’s worth can be found in the number of students it rejects.

Although the books devoted to “elite” and “top” and

“highly selective” college admissions currently make up a vast literature, the very notion of a how-to manual devoted to the secrets of blasting one’s way into the Ivy League is, in fact, a relatively recent phenomenon. The 1961 book *The Ivy League Today*, for example, was much more concerned with “Ivy mores and conduct” than with test scores and personal essays. The first chapter, “The Couth and the Uncouth,” approvingly described the Ivy Leaguer’s “amused tolerance” of the nationwide craze for all things Ivy that had begun in the late fifties. Ivy fashion “became an absolute uniform among the college students of the nation,” Frederic Birmingham, the book’s author, wrote. “It was also adopted by nightclub comics, prizefighters, delivery boys, and gangsters appearing before Senate committees, although these usually muscular gentlemen emphasized a snugger fit at hips and thigh.”

This newly heightened national interest in the Ivy League was probably the impetus for the publication of another 1961 book on the subject, this one a bit less insouciant in tone and nature: *How an Ivy League College Decides on Admissions*. It was the culmination of a year-long investigation of admissions practices at Yale, and was first published, in shorter form, as an essay in *The New Yorker* (it may in fact be the ur-text for the sort of book of which *Admissions Confidential* is the most recent). Although the Yale depicted in the book seems to have given longer shrift to grades and scores than *The Ivy League Today* would have one believe, great care was taken not to admit a class composed entirely of “successful test-takers” and (to use the dean of admissions’s telling term) “little twerps.” Pushiness, overeagerness, any display of uncouthly aggressive behavior, was an unpardonable sin to the admissions office. One boy’s future at Yale was grievously jeopardized by his zealous father, who used a chance encounter with an admissions officer to brandish a scrapbook of his son’s accomplishments. The admissions officer on whom the scrapbook was foisted sadly remarked,

“The pitiful thing is that the boy is a great kid. The whole incident, which will do him no good, will have to be brought out at the committee meeting. The parental strategy here gives a slight insight into the boy’s home life and background.”

This chilling use of the word “background” is more revealing of what did or did not constitute Ivy material than anything else in the book.

Two decades later the world had changed. By the 1980s being able to wear a pair of khakis with a certain casual elegance no longer greased the skids in an Ivy League admissions office, because suddenly numberless ruffians with all manner of more substantial accomplishments were gumming up the works. By the 1980s admissions guidebooks no longer took the form of sociological surveys; they had become utterly prescriptive in nature. The subtitle of



the first chapter of *How to Get Into an Ivy League School* (1985) was “A Gate Crasher’s Guide to the Ivy League,” and the chapter described an admissions scene in which eagerness and grinding preparation were the very stuff of which an Ivy League admission was made. This was the beginning of the era in which Ivy League applicants needed almost ludicrously impressive bona fides if they were to be alive in the water. Even a girl who was “streamlined Ivy, prepped from the cradle,” needed not only a high school visit to Israel to give her the stuff of a winning essay but a visit that happened to occur (some kids are just born lucky) “during the invasion of Lebanon.”

Had the current admissions climate existed back then, of course, her trip wouldn’t have clinched the deal unless her *destination* had been Lebanon. Nothing makes today’s Ivy League admissions officer sit up and take notice more than a flak jacket and flying shrapnel—that is, as long as it’s accompanied by a 5 on the AP physics exam and a combined SAT score of 1420 or better. For the most part, the current books on the subject of elite-college admissions share a numbing sameness, although I did find *The Princeton Review’s College Admissions* remarkable for its rather caustic counsel: “Misspellings in your application can make you look like a moron,” it advises, and “You probably should not attach a photograph to your application if you are very overweight.” I’d like to have most of these books burned. They

explain that if kids are to have any chance at a top college, they must pursue the most rigorous curriculum available to them, both within and without the walls of their secondary schools. That’s true. It is also true that such a curriculum is going to crush a lot of kids. A regimen of brutal academic hazing may be appropriate in some disciplines, for medical students or Ph.D. candidates, but it is not appropriate for fifteen-year-olds.

A subcategory of this genre of books is composed of in-depth narrative accounts of the experiences of individual students applying to Ivy League colleges, their every emotional nuance dwelled on in luxuriant detail. It’s a kind of admissions porn, which, like all pornography produced for a niche market, can seem simultaneously comical and befuddling to those outside the niche. Bill Paul’s *Getting In* (even the title is suggestive) describes the experiences of five Princeton applicants. Paul recounts his interviews with these teenagers in a style appropriate to, say, a Sue Grafton novel (“Lucy spoke with the hard, nasal accent of southern New Jersey as she held aloft a solitary French fry and pointed it at me”), adding to the impression that these kids are not merely applying to college but are in fact involved in a drama of almost life-and-death consequence. The teenagers described in such books have transferred the most profound and elemental of adolescent emotions—romantic attraction—onto the most unromantic of pursuits: college selection. *Getting*

Into Yale is, according to its jacket copy, “the tale of Josh Berezin, who after only one visit, became obsessed with entering the hallowed halls and tree-lined yards of Yale.” What happened during this visit to turn the poor boy into an obsessive? Well, he loved the Gothic architecture, and he had a good meal (“the best calzone *ever*”) at a restaurant five minutes from campus, and an admissions person told him that Yale students like to argue vehemently and then go out and play Frisbee. (Were these arguments perhaps about whether or not to play Frisbee? Unclear.) Although its rather misleading subtitle—“How One Student Wrote *THIS* Book and Got Into the School of His Dreams”—suggests that Berezin’s admission was the result of a stunt, in fact he had the goods, carrying a healthy number of APs (four in his junior year), scoring notably well on his boards (all but one of his scores were in the 700s), and participating on the varsity football and wrestling teams. He did the requisite bit of community service, including a stint with Habitat for Humanity (“the most exciting moment was when I got called a ‘white bitch’ by some kid on a bike”), and also endured an arduous Outward Bound program (“I’m talking *Deliverance* backwoods here”). The most revealing part of the book consists of diary entries, which clearly show just how hard high school students bound for elite colleges must work. The busy roster of extracurricular activities that Berezin pursued during the summer after his junior year was brutal enough (“For the past four days I’ve been running from football to the ghetto and back again”). But the demands of the coursework itself are what really command attention. Late one night in the midst of his studies he wonders,

Where the hell did the time go? The only way I could finish all my homework would be to stay up till about 3 a.m., but if I do there’s no way I’ll be productive tomorrow. I suppose I probably should get used to it now if I plan to go to medical school.

Students who are up for this kind of rigor should consider doing several things. First, they should buy a single very useful guidebook: *A Is for Admission: The Insider’s Guide to Getting Into the Ivy League and Other Top Colleges*, by Michele Hernández, a former assistant director of admissions at Dartmouth. In a roundabout way Hernández teaches upper-middle-class kids a lesson that refined mothers used to inculcate from the cradle onward: If you’ve got it, don’t flaunt it.

If your father is the president and CEO of a big-name investment bank, the committee is going to be expecting quite an amazing applicant, one who has gone beyond his comfy lifestyle to make himself known. You might just write down “banker” for occupation. It’s not a lie, but at the same time, it doesn’t create such a high expectation in terms of wealth and privilege. Rather than saying “chief

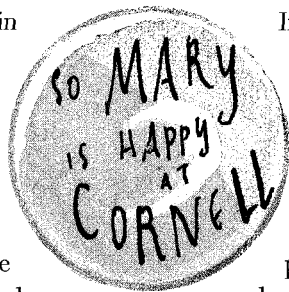
neurosurgeon,” why not just M.D.? Rather than “chief partner in a major law firm,” just put “lawyer.”

The second thing applicants ought to consider seriously is that it’s a great big PC world out there in Ivy-admissions land, and they can either get hip or go to State. Rachel Toor seems to think that her progressive social views—which she showcases to a curious degree in the book—put her in the minority among admissions people at elite colleges, but this was not my experience of these people as I came to know them during school visits and conventions. In my experience her viewpoint is the norm rather than the exception.

In one sense the fact that such people dominate the field is a good thing. In the past twenty years the elite colleges have made an earnest and highly laudable effort to enroll and graduate significant numbers of black and Hispanic students, and this is the direct result of the hard work and relentless advocacy of people like Rachel Toor. But many of these people don’t begin to acknowledge their *own* biases. Toor is

to be congratulated, for example, for pointing out the greatly disturbing fact that many teachers’ recommendations for female African-American students describe the students physically, with terms such as “beautiful,” “striking,” “elegant,” and “statuesque.” She is right to characterize this as “racial stereotyping,” to acknowledge that these students have been “sexualized” in their teachers’ descriptions of them. But Toor herself describes an applicant whom she has encountered in an interview thus: “She is exquisitely and expensively dressed in a pearl-pink linen sheath. Her shiny WASP-straight hair is pulled into an elegant bun, her makeup simple, emphasizing her natural beauty.” As soon as I got to “WASP,” I knew we were looking at a loser; and indeed, the girl turns out to be some clunker rich kid who, maddeningly, must be admitted because of Papa’s dough—and who may therefore be “sexualized” with impunity. In evaluating students’ extracurricular activities Toor is “personally most turned off by Junior Statesmen of America and by kids who started investment clubs at their schools.” Pity the poor kid stuck out there in Louisville or Grand Rapids: he knows no better. Get a clue, kid! Dump the Statesmen! Join the Gay/Straight Student Alliance. Enroll in a women’s-studies class—I don’t care if you have to take two buses to get there. In fact, get to know the people on the bus and become incensed about their oppression (but not so incensed that you liberate the housekeeper while Mom’s tied up in moot court).

The goal here is to raise your consciousness enough to attract the attention of an admissions officer at an elite college, but not so much that you find the very idea of an elite college objectionable. It’s a fine line. As a PC naif, you might assume, for example, that it is constructive and worthwhile to read books reflective of cultures different from your own and to try to learn and grow from this experience. Not so



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THE **Atlantic**

fast! Toor is characteristically dismissive of white kids who are drawn to “novels of nonidentity” and write “gee-whiz essays about ‘Native Son,’ ‘Invisible Man,’ or any of a number of Toni Morrison books.” Better to pick something by a dead white guy and explain what it taught you about the patriarchy. Try smacking the Hemingway piñata. Be creative. You might also enter into a brief, awareness-raising romance with someone of either a different race or the same sex or—Hello, New Haven!—both. Today’s applicant to the elite colleges enters a game in which the opportunity for committing a faux pas is just as great as it was fifty years ago, only now the faux pas is on the order of joining the Junior Statesmen of America rather than of sporting ill-fitting khakis. The Junior Statesmen strike an infelicitous note in the elite-college admissions office in part because they are presumably not keenly sensitized to the tyranny of the patriarchy, but even more so because the very name is redolent of the kind of middle-middle-class earnestness that the elite colleges have always shunned. At the deep heart of the current college mania is something irrational and inexpressible, and it largely stems from that most irrational and inexpressible of American anxieties: class anxiety.

As a college counselor, I saw that even the parents of applicants, much as they talked about wanting their children to get a “good education,” seemed to know that more was driving their family’s mania for certain colleges than simply the quality of the academic fare on offer. Often one of the parents, usually the father, would tell me about the way he had chosen his own college, how it had been a painless and straightforward process. Often the choice had hinged on geography (many had gone to UCLA) or the recommendation of a guidance counselor or a parent. These remarks never concluded with a confession that “because of the indiscriminate nature of my college-selection process, I sit before you as dumb as a bunny rabbit.” Nor should they have. The parents tended to be highly—sometimes stratospherically—successful. They ran studios, they were partners in huge law firms, surgeons with national reputations, CEOs, bankers. But they wanted something more than that for their children. What was it, exactly?

In a 1996 *New York* magazine article titled “Poor Little Smart Kids,” a Manhattan mother is quoted as saying,

“There’s almost a fetishistic sense of power, being able to associate your child with one of these schools ... especially at one of these East Side dinner parties ... the women don’t work, so all they talk about is school. It’s like belonging to the same country club or something.”

This is somewhat uncharitable. For the most part, I found that the parents I dealt with wanted what all good parents want: to give their children the very best. To a certain

kind of parent—to me, for example—the very words “better” or “best” are often potent enough to preclude rational analysis of almost any given set of options.

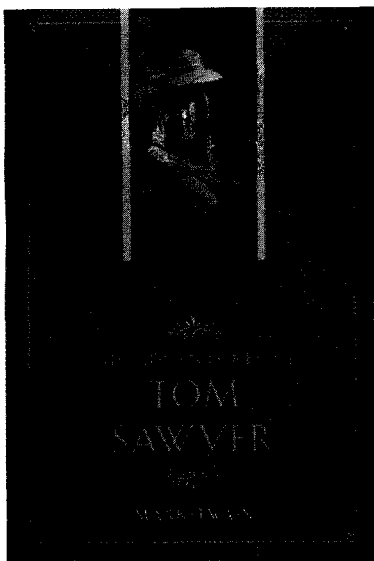
Perhaps one might leave all the fads and fashions aside and think sensibly, calmly, about what one wants from college. (Revealingly, although Berezin wrote a whole book about how he got into Yale, he never answered the most obvious question his book provokes: Why, precisely, did he want to go there so desperately? It clearly wasn’t because he had a burning desire to study under Martin Shubik or David Brion Davis.)

Almost all the parents I dealt with believed that an elite college would give their children the best education, the best chance of success in their chosen fields (particularly in the most remunerative fields), and a set of incalculably valuable “connections” that would open doors (the phrase “the way the world really works” was often employed in this context) for the child long after the parents had gone on to their own reward. On at least one count they were perhaps misinformed. As James Fallows points out elsewhere in this issue (citing a study for the National Bureau of Economic Research), “the economic benefit of attending a more selective school [is] negligible.”

Do the most highly selective colleges really offer a better education than less selective ones? This would be a much easier question to answer if the University of Chicago weren’t such an unfashionable place among so many undergraduates. There it sits, with its dreamy Gothic architecture of the precise type that kids nowadays go in for, its bumper crop of Nobel laureates (the most in the nation), its hugely impressive student-faculty ratio, its demonstrably extraordinary programs and departments. But the kids don’t really like it. Why? It’s too intellectual. What, then, do they mean by the term “good education”? Good but not too good, I guess. It’s the kind of education you can get at certain places but not others—at Georgetown but not at the University of Washington; at Duke but not at Chapel Hill. It’s the kind of education you can get definitely at Stanford, less so at Berkeley, much less so at Michigan, hardly at all at Wisconsin, and not at all at the University of Illinois. That kind of thinking has always bewildered me. Even though Rachel Toor has genuine respect for Duke, she finds herself unable to provide a rational explanation for the school’s current enormous popularity with students eyeing elite colleges. During admissions presentations for the university she would, for example, dutifully conclude her remarks about the faculty by saying that “the best-known professors are teaching our youngest students.” But other facts gave her pause. She writes,

It’s also the case that we have not one Nobel laureate on our faculty. We have fewer than two dozen members of the National Academy of Sciences ... What we have are a lot of very competent—and a handful of excellent—academics.





“The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who *can't* read them.”

—Mark Twain

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And Duke is a place where many of Toor's friends on the faculty complained "that their students never challenged them, that the kids tended to imbibe information dully and without questioning"—a place that a politically active and aware Berkeley girl might find "oppressively politically apathetic."

The perception of what constitutes an "elite" school often has little to do with academic excellence. After all, one important measure of a university's quality is how many of its faculty members belong to the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine. The ultra-selective Brown counts among its faculty sixteen who are members. Duke, the object of many a prep school student's swoon, has thirty-five. But the University of Washington has seventy-one, Wisconsin sixty-four,

COUPLE AT THE CLUB

The bass goes it alone. The bass goes
by subway. The trumpet shines and swerves,
yellow taxi breaking from the light.

The piano bides its time. The trombone
takes a walk in the rain. Bass
boots it, freight train heading west.

The man hides in his courage. Oh dear me no.
In his fright. Sometimes he wears a hat because
he is English. Sometimes because he is bald.

One tune is tough. Broken glass,
broken teeth in it. The piano does
reconnaissance. The sax loiters, bold.

Sax swelters. Flares. His gin is
on the rocks, his hand scarred.
The drums fall down

the stairs. He puts his anger under his hat.
Under the table. Piano remembers, piano
pounds on the door. Somebody opens

a window. Somebody opens the roof.
Some geese are trumpets
calling down the sky. The snare

stings. Bites. The drums obsess.
He is pretty, he is hard as glass. Piano
remembers everything. So does she.

—PAMELA ALEXANDER

Michigan fifty-eight, Texas fifty-four, and Illinois fifty-three.

Part of my problem in getting on board the college frenzy was that I genuinely believed that any one of the colleges on our approved list of a hundred or so was capable of providing students with a good, even a great, education. The funny thing about teenagers is that very often the best of them, the most interesting and curious, are rather lousy high school students. They have other things on their minds than geeking out every single point on the AP U.S. history exam. They are very often readers, and preparation for elite-college admission does not allow one to be a reader; it's far too time consuming. These "lousy" students were often among my favorites, and I never feared that they were going to lose a chance at a great education because they didn't have the stuff of an "elite" admission. They *themselves* were smart. They didn't need some Ferrari of a college nudging them along the path to a great education; they were going to get one wherever they went.

So, what we are left with is "the way the world really works." Here's the thinking: you go to Brown, wander through in a delighted haze of great classes and cool, intellectual—but not too intellectual—discussions about *Un Chien Andalou*, and then, in an eleventh-hour spasm of professional ambition that strikes you in the middle of a killer game of ultimate Frisbee, you decide it would be fun to work in a museum. Wait a minute, your roommate says. That guy Joe Blow—isn't his mom on like the board or something at like the Met? You know Joe! You and Joe were in a semiotics seminar junior year! Somebody stubs out a joint and gets you the student directory (it's the spirit of camaraderie that really makes these places so wonderful). Badda-bing, badda-boom, Joe's mom makes a phone call. Before you know it, you, your best suit, and your soon-to-be-conferred Brown degree are hurtling toward the island of Manhattan, where the curator of works on paper eagerly awaits your thoughts on the Caprichos; if they're good enough, you'll be answering the works-on-paper telephone and enjoying an employee discount at the gift shop in no time flat. (Feel free, in the spirit of fairness, to imagine this scenario taking place at another elite college—Dartmouth, say—and then change the variables accordingly: *The Birth of a Nation* ... the middle of Winter Carnival ... an internship at the International Monetary Fund ... *Federalist Papers* seminar ... sets down a Molson Golden Ale ... and so forth.) Does this really happen? Sometimes. In some fields, particularly in the news and entertainment media and in the arts, an Ivy League degree and the host of "connections" that often accompany it are distinct advantages for first-time job seekers. (Of course, in just as many other fields an Ivy education doesn't pull much weight. The highest echelons of corporate America, for instance, contain remarkably few men and women who obtained bachelor's degrees from elite schools.) And even if Ivy-oriented jobs rarely blossom into full-

blown careers (many of the most glamorous fields are full of dead-end jobs held by insanely well educated people), they can provide a very nice interlude between college and the pursuit of an M.B.A. or a law degree or whatever other kind of graduate degree is necessary for one of the really “good” jobs of the sort that young people who have endured the rigors and expectations of elite education tend to want for themselves.

Of course, connections aren’t going to help when it comes time to apply to those supercompetitive law and business schools, at which point one will be up against not only straight-A students from Yale and Amherst but also ferociously smart applicants from “sub-elite” universities that are nonetheless home to supercompetitive graduate-level programs (for instance, the University of Michigan, whose law school, ranked by academics, judges, and lawyers as the seventh best in the country, is one of the places the Amherst and Yale grads will be clawing to get into). And winning a clerkship on the Court of Appeals or an offer from Goldman Sachs is going to depend on having done extraordinarily well in law or business school—not on where you spent your undergraduate years. And, of course, whether or not you make partner at a tony law firm or investment bank will depend on stellar performance for seven years at those places. *That’s* how the world really works in 2001. (By the way, a certain Boston-based, Brahmin-ish, highbrow magazine was edited from 1981 through 1999 by a graduate of the University of Oklahoma and is now edited by a University of New Hampshire grad. The man who preceded both of them never went to college. I have noticed that many organizations are well staffed by Ivy graduates but helmed by graduates of other schools—maybe the *true* “Admissions Confidential” is this: *Ivy Grads Face Glass Ceiling!*)

There is another way to go about all of this. If a student wants a great university, why on earth would Berkeley hold less cachet than Stanford—let alone than such places as Brown and Georgetown, whose admissions selectivity may not reflect a commensurate level of academic quality? If a demonstrably superior academic environment is important, again, why not the University of Chicago? If the atmosphere there is too relentlessly intellectual, what about the world-class University of Michigan or California; or the first-rate University of Texas, Washington, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Iowa, or Illinois; or the University of Pittsburgh or Carnegie Mellon? They boast extraordinary faculties and also offer students thriving social lives. And if the superachieving college applicant from, say, Montclair or

Burlingame is really looking for a culturally enriching experience, he or she is far more likely to find it by spending the undergraduate years in flyover country than by spending them on the opposite coast. When it comes to excellent small colleges with reasonable admissions requirements, there are almost too many to list: Occidental, Kenyon, Bucknell, Carleton, Macalester, Reed, University of the South, Hobart and William Smith, New College, Davidson, Washington and Lee, Beloit, Lawrence, Gettysburg, Lewis & Clark, Lafayette, Hamilton, Whitman, Grinnell, Colgate. (Students and their parents might want to compare two columns in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings: “Reputation”—that is, how college and university administrators regard a school—and “Acceptance rate.” They’ll find a number of schools that are easier to get into than their reputation would suggest, and vice versa.) There are also schools with relaxed admissions standards, such as Pitzer and the University of Massachusetts, that belong to consortiums in which students can take classes at some of the most “elite” and “selective” colleges in the country, such as Pomona and Amherst. Instead of getting so nutty, families might think deeply about what the student really wants to accomplish in college. *Making the Most of College* (2001), by Richard Light, is full of excellent suggestions and might help families to find useful and meaningful criteria for school selection.

Powerful emotions get mixed up in the college-admissions process. Michael Thompson wrote in “College Admission as a Failed Rite of Passage” that central to this experience is “the most important and most difficult transition in all of life: the end of childhood and the late-adolescent separation and individuation from parents.” He continued,

The frantic involvement of many parents in the process is, from my perspective, a cover for this profound parental anxiety: Did I do a good job with this child? Did I do everything I needed to do for this child? Is this child prepared? Is this child going to have a good life? ... Such fears about letting go of an unfinished child exist in all families. How can we let go of a child who is still so young in so many ways?

Surely he’s right about this. Also lurking uncomfortably beneath the surface of these waters are class anxiety, the culture wars, and a whole set of unexamined prejudices about what does or does not constitute a “good” college. All this drama is nice for admissions offices that like to see applications stacked to the roof and supplicants spilling out into hallways as they wait nervously for information sessions to begin. None of it is good for seventeen-year-olds just taking their first tentative steps into adult life. ▀

Books discussed in this essay:

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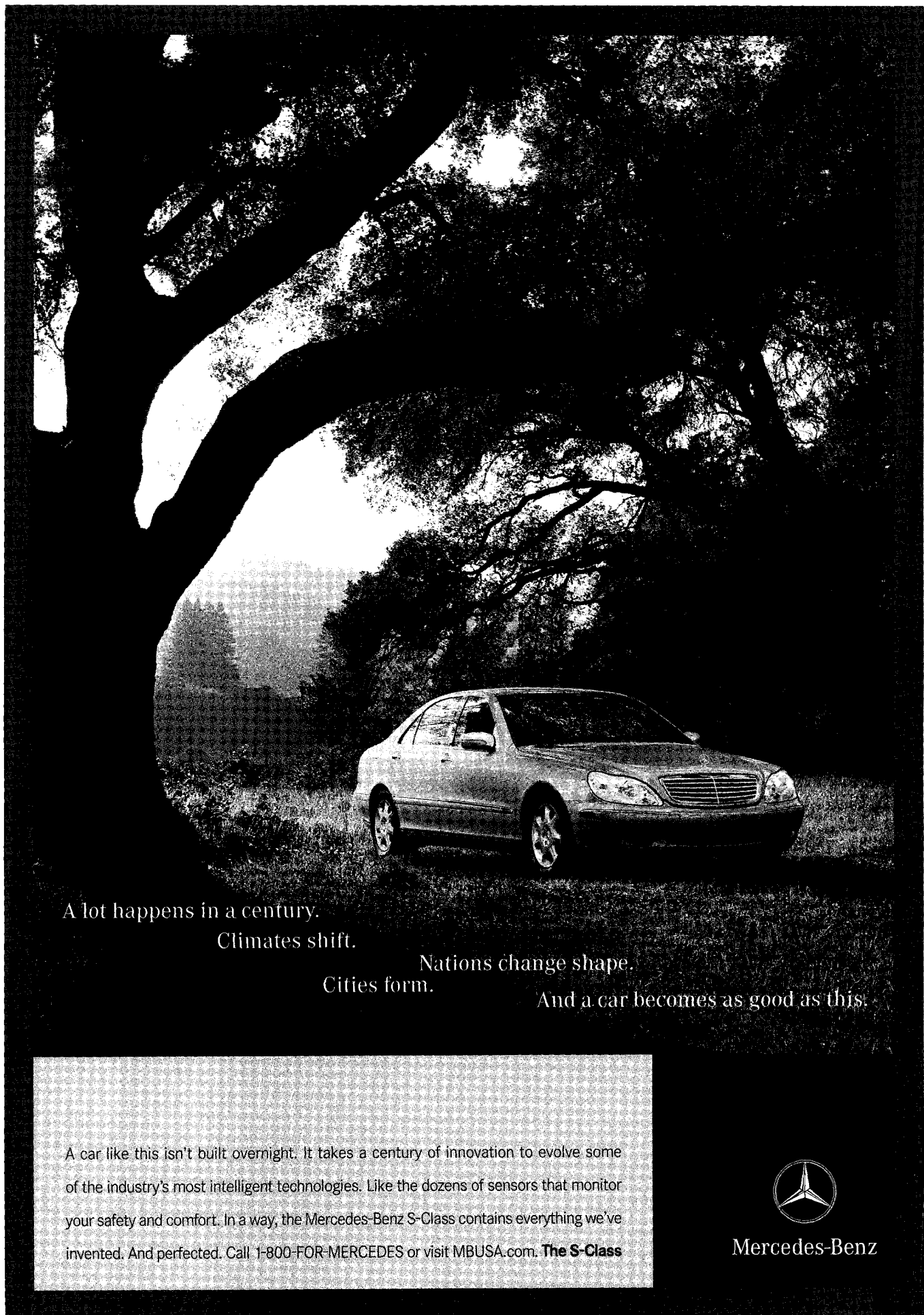
A Is for Admission
by Michele Hernández
Warner Books, 1997

Admissions Confidential
by Rachel Toor
St. Martin’s Press, 2001

Getting In
by Bill Paul
Addison-Wesley, 1995

Getting Into Yale
by Josh Berezin
Hyperion, 1998

Making the Most of College
by Richard Light
Harvard University Press, 2001



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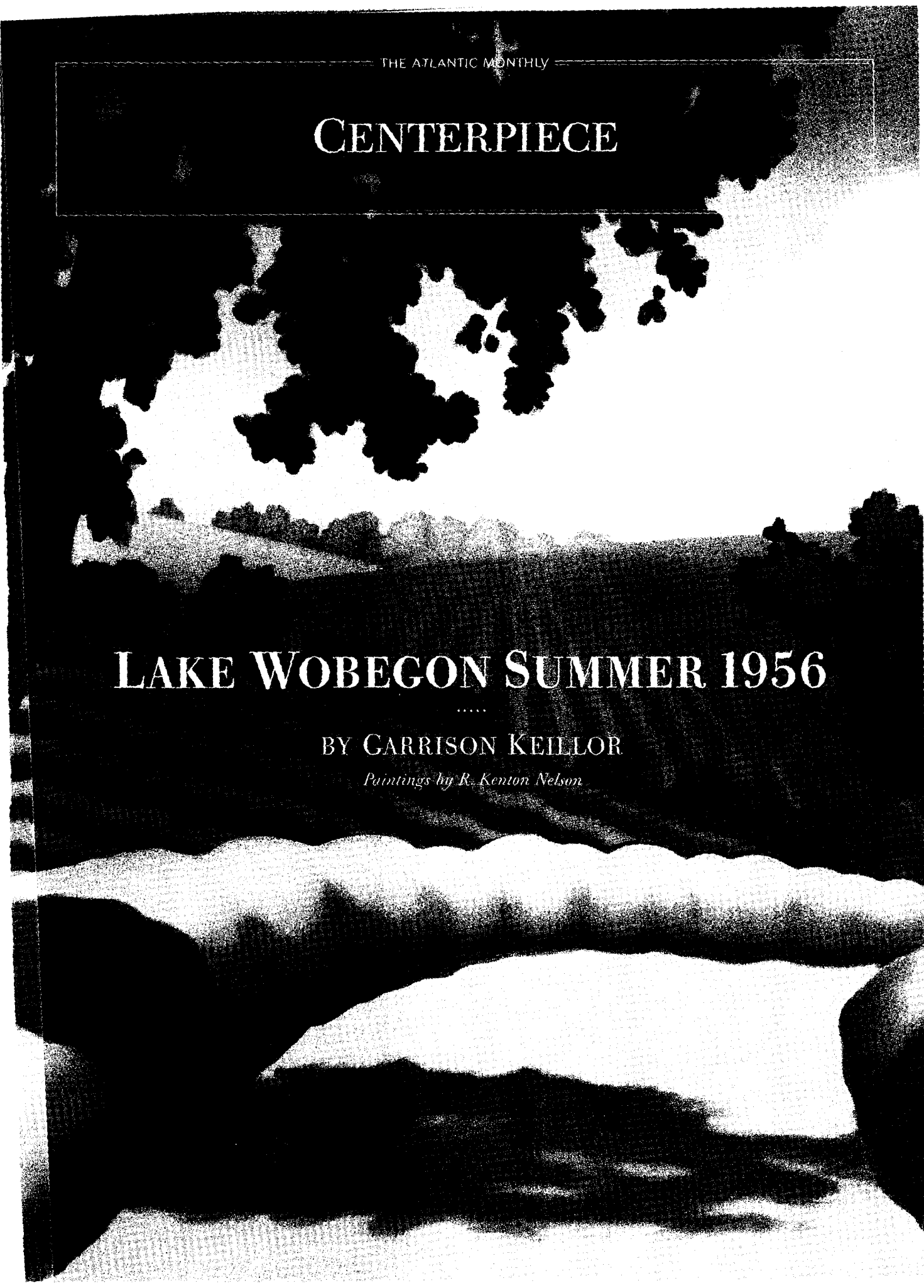


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A black and white photograph of a landscape. In the foreground, there's a body of water with some ripples. In the middle ground, there's a line of trees and a bright, possibly overexposed, area that could be a beach or a very bright sky. The overall tone is high-contrast, with deep blacks and bright whites.

THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY

CENTERPIECE

LAKE WOBEGON SUMMER 1956

BY GARRISON KEILLOR

Paintings by R. Kenton Nelson

- cute, prosecute. *Informal* pull off.
fill, function, play, stage.
performance *noun* The act of beginning and carrying through to completion : discharge, effectuation, execution, prosecution. See *NO* in Index. — See also *behavior*, *interpretation*.
performer *noun* See *player*.
perfume *noun* See *fragrance*.
perfume *verb* See *scent*.
perfunctory *adjective* Performed or performing automatically and impersonally : automatic, mechanical. See *CONCERN* in Index.
perhaps *adverb* See *maybe*.
periapt *noun* See *charm*.
peril *noun* See *danger*.
peril *verb* See *endanger*.
perilous *adjective* See *dangerous*.
perimeter *noun* See *border*, *circumference*.
period *noun* 1. A specific length of time characterized by the occurrence of certain conditions or events : season, span, stretch, term. See *TIME* in Index. 2. An interval regarded as a distinct evolutionary or developmental unit : phase, stage. See *TIME* in Index. — See also *age*, *end*, *time*.
periodic *adjective* See *intermittent*, *recurrent*.
periodical *adjective* See *intermittent*, *recurrent*.
periodically *adverb* See *intermittently*.
peripatetic *adjective* See *nomadic*.
periphery *noun* See *border*, *circumference*.
periphrastic *adjective* See *wordy*.
perish *verb* See *die*.
perjure *verb* See *lie*.
perjured *adjective* See *perjurious*.
perjurer *noun* See *liar*.
performance • perplexed
perjurious *adjective* Marked by lying under oath : forsworn, perjured. See *TRUE* in Index.
perjury *noun* See *mendacity*.
perk up *verb* See *encourage*, *recover*.
permanent *adjective* See *continuing*.
permeate *verb* See *charge*.
permissible *adjective* Capable of being allowed : admissible, allowable. *Slang*: kosher. See *ALLOW* in Index.
permission *noun* The approving of an action, especially when done by one in authority : allowance, approbation, approval, authorization, consent, endorsement, leave, license, permit, sanction. *Informal*: OK. See *ALLOW* in Index.
permit *verb* 1. To neither forbid nor prevent : allow, have, let, suffer, tolerate. See *ALLOW* in Index. 2. To give one's consent to : allow, approve, approve, authorize, consent, endorse, let, sanction. *Informal*: OK. See *ALLOW* in Index. 3. To afford an opportunity for : admit, allow, let. See *ALLOW* in Index. — See also *enable*.
permit *noun* See *license*, *permission*.
permutation *noun* See *change*.
pernicious *adjective* See *destructive*, *virulent*.
perorate *verb* See *rant*.
perpendicular *adjective* See *vertical*.
perpetrate *verb* See *commit*.
perpetual *adjective* See *continual*, *endless*.
perpetuate *verb* See *immortalize*.
perpetuity *noun* See *endlessness*, *eternity*.
perplex *verb* See *complicate*, *confuse*.
perplexed *adjective* See *confused*.



LAKE WOBEGON SUMMER 1956

Aunt Eva could hypnotize chickens and recite the Twenty-third Psalm backward. Aunt Flo knew everyone's story and didn't mince words. Jim Dandy, with his six-foot-deep voice, ruled the press box at the ballpark. Grandma spoke about her death and planned her funeral. And in the summer darkness the front porch of the house was bathed in light, "like the bridge of a great ship plying the dark ocean waters." Episodes from a new novel by Garrison Keillor

PARADISE

I am descended from Sanctified Brethren, country people who woke before sunrise and clambered out of bed and dressed in coveralls or print dresses that smelled of lye soap and took their porcelain chamber pots to the outhouse and emptied them and washed their faces in cold water from a steel basin and made porridge and corn bread for breakfast and after breakfast read a chapter of Scripture and said a prayer for their loved ones and the President of the United States and then went to their work outdoors, sun or snow, raising cows, pigs, and chickens, and corn and hay.

The farm was small, about 160 acres, in rolling sandy hills a few miles north of Lake Wobegon. Daddy grew up on the farm with his five brothers and sisters, and by the time I was old enough to figure out who was who, all of them had moved to town except Aunt Eva, who never married and stayed on the home place with Grandma. The land was rented to a neighboring farmer, Mr. Walberg, a man with immense black eyebrows. Grandma and Eva busied themselves cleaning and cooking and washing and tending the garden and raising chickens, as they had always done.

When I was three years old, Daddy went away to Fort Lee, New Jersey, to serve in the United States Army as a paymaster's clerk, and Mother and I and the older brother and sister went to live on the farm, and this began the paradise part of my life, my earliest memories. Mother and the Olders shared a bedroom, and Eva and I shared a bedroom. It was small, under the eaves, and I imagined we lived on a ship. The wallpaper pattern was little bouquets of blue flowers tied with pale-pink ribbons. Eva told me stories in her soft twang and sang me to sleep with sweet, sad songs about the days of yore, and the babes in the woods who lay down and died and the robins spread strawberry leaves over them, and the death of Old Rex, who found Little Jimmy in the storm and lay beside the sleeping form and thereby kept the child warm. When rescue came at break of day to the hollow where they lay, the faithful dog had passed away. Somewhere around that time I began to think of Eva as a mother. She wasn't Mother, but she was the warm body who lay next to me and whose smell I loved. I took an old dress of hers and curled up with it for my afternoon nap. She was my Eva. My Queen of Heaven.

She was a fireplug of a woman, with thick legs and small hands and a flat face, who all her days went around in a cotton print dress, or the ancient navy-blue thing she wore to town for the Breaking of Bread on Sunday morning. She had no children, and so she belonged to me and liked the same exact things I liked. Meat loaf. Fried-egg sandwiches. Fresh tomatoes eaten off the vine. Farts. Talking late at night. We loved the same radio shows. *Burns & Allen* and *Fibber McGee & Molly* and *Lum & Abner* and *Footlight Favorites* with the Radio Toe-Tappers and

The Post Toasties Cavalcade with Spike Hopper and His Jazz Equestrians, originating from the famous Tom-Tom Room at the Hotel Oglallah, on New York's fashionable West 49th Street.

Eva woke us up in the morning by calling out, "Daylight in the swamps!" She just liked the sound of it. She had a whole raft of phrases. She said, "If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride." She said, "What we lack in our heads, we must make up for with our feet." If you burped at the table, she said, "Bring it up again and we'll take a vote on it." She enjoyed jokes of all kinds, knock-knocks or Little Willies, riddles, moron jokes. We tossed a softball back and forth, and she complimented me on my arm.

I basked in her praise, coveted her praise. Mother was the one who reminded me to make the bed and do my chores and worried about spoiling me. Eva didn't worry about spoiling. She told me that I was the brightest little boy she knew and that I would grow up to be a great man like Franklin D. Roosevelt or Jack Benny.

I loved the little white house with the big kitchen and tiny parlor, the old

black spinet, the paradise of red-oak woods and pasture. Empty sheds to play in and a long-deceased Ford tractor that was my Spitfire, my B-17. The big, spooky old barn where you could climb up the side of the mow and leap down onto the loose hay, or stand on the highest promontory of bales and orate into the sweet, grassy air.

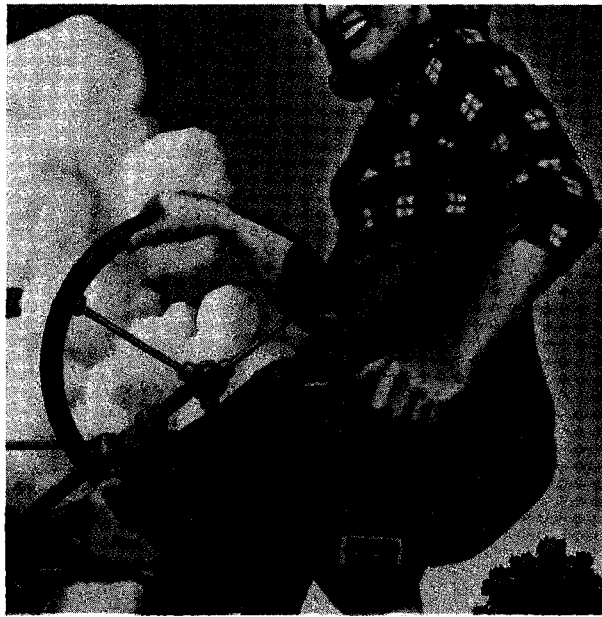
Eva could hypnotize chickens by cradling them in her arm and stroking their foreheads, ten or twelve strokes between the little yellow eyes and down the beak, and the chicken, dazed, would stand motionless for several minutes before awakening from the trance and falling over in a feathery heap. She took us swimming in the river and there performed her trick of standing on her head, her two big white legs sticking straight up out of the water. She was the only grown-up to behave this way; the others sat in the kitchen and drank coffee and spoke of serious matters, such as the soul. She could recite the Twenty-third Psalm at top speed backward or rattle off the eighty-seven counties of Minnesota: "Aitkin, Anoka, Becker, Beltrami, Benton, Big Stone, Blue Earth, Brown, Carlton, Carver, Cass, Chippewa"—a blur of sound,

and I loved hearing it. She could play several pieces on the piano by heart. One was by Chopin and the others were not.

At night she hummed me the Chopin tune as we lay in bed, or "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," or "Abide With Me, Fast Falls the Eventide," and I snuggled up against her broad back and fell asleep in her auntly smell and then the room was bright with sunlight and I dressed and trotted out back to pee and washed my face and sat down to breakfast. And if it was summer, we would stroll out to the garden down a dirt lane beyond the machine shed and hoe corn and weed the onions and beets and tighten up the twine that the beans twined along, and then she would say, "How about a nice ripe tomato?" And we would each pick one, hot in the sun, and wipe off the sand, and eat it, the juice running down our chins.

FLO

A lovely summer night, almost ten o'clock, and Daddy and Mother and I on the porch. I am looking at *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* and a chapter on the French Huguenots, and tucked inside it a magazine called *High School Orgies*, lent to me by my classmate Leonard Larsen, opened to an ad for a cologne made from "love chemicals" that will turn any girl to putty in your hands. You dab some behind your ears and hold her in your arms and suddenly all



FUN

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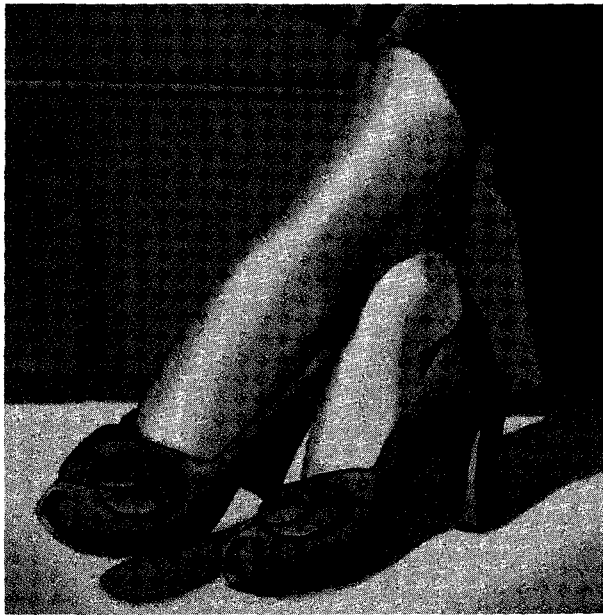
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resistance is gone, she is whispering for you to thrill her, fulfill her, do what you like. Plus a book of surefire pickup lines with a bonus chapter, "Techniques of Effective Kissing." You can also purchase nifty magic tricks, a correspondence course in jujitsu, novelty underwear, and powerful binoculars that can see through clothing. A cartoon man aims his binocs at a high-stepping mama and his eyes bug out and his jaw drops and beads of sweat fly off his brow.

The big sister has gone to bed, miffed about a boy she met at a Youth for Christ party. It was a Shoe Mixer. All the girls took off one shoe and put them in a pile, and each boy was brought in blindfolded, and whoever's shoe he chose, she was the girl he sat with for cocoa and cookies. The sister was picked last (because her shoe was so big, presumably), and the poor boy plopped down next to her and she tried to testify to him. She told him that in Christ the last shall be first. And in contravention of the rules of Shoe Mixing, he went off and sat in a corner by himself for the rest of the evening. She was hurt. Hurt feelings run in the family. Daddy is hurt about how we waste electricity, and Mother is hoping



that Aunt Doe doesn't think we don't *want* her to visit, and I am feeling guilty about *High School Orgies* even as I sit and pore over the story of Julie and her drama teacher, Mr. Peters. *Mr. Peters gazed at the front of her blouse and her pert young buds barely visible between the buttons. "Oh, Mr. Peters," she said. "Do you really think I could be Juliet in the class play?" He had taken the precaution of locking the classroom door. "You certainly have the talent for it, Julie," he whispered. "It's only a question of being able to lose your inhibitions onstage."*

I have a dirty mind and this is a fact. I have had a dirty mind since I was twelve and now it's two years later and it's worse. I know it, Grandpa in heaven knows it. Someday it will be general knowledge. "Be sure your sin will find you out." That's Aunt Flo's motto. Never do in secret what you wouldn't want the world to see, because time brings all things to light. People steal and lie and scheme and do all manner of surreptitious deeds in the dark, but don't kid yourself, the lights will come on someday.

Mother turns up the radio and the Trojan Seed Corn Troubadour sings to a throbbing accordion:

*Come live with me and be my love
Midst valleys, woods, and fields,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That this brief summer yields.*

The Troubadour sends a howdy to Myrtle in Elbow Lake and he sings a request for John, the best hubby a gal could hope for, with love from Marcy—*You're the peak of the Machu Picchu. You're unique and it's great to micchu.* And I imagine me motivating around the dance floor with a little heartthrob who looks up with dreamboat eyes and says, "Spin me, Daddy-o," and we spin, we swing, I toss her up like a bag of potatoes and slide her between my legs—*You're a goddess, you're an Aphrodite. You're as hot as Mae West's nightie.*

Mother is tapping her toe to this. Daddy says, "Do you need to play it so loud? The neighbors'll think we're throwing a party and serving free champagne."

The neighbors would never imagine any such thing. They know us too well. We are Sanctified Brethren. We can never have a good time if other people are watching. God only knows what we do behind closed doors, but in public we are pills. Walk around like birch trees, grimace, look down at your shoes, mumble hello. *Julie was an apt pupil indeed, responding to his every caress, kissing him with a depth of passion seldom found in one so young, and before he could remove his shoes*

and socks, she was clawing at his trousers, trying to get at his lovestick, and before he knew it, he was buck naked, flat on his back, and she was riding him for all she was worth and moaning like a truck on an uphill grade—

“Boy, you never know how kids are going to turn out, do you,” Grandpa says, looking out the window of heaven, wearing his best wool suit and starched white shirt with the armbands, his hair perfectly combed. “I used to think that kid might become a preacher. Now I don’t see how he’s going to stay out of prison. Nobody in this family ever went to prison for sex crimes. He’d be the first.”

“Yes,” Jesus says, “you never know about these things.”

He and Grandpa are drinking cups of coffee and eating gingersnaps. Grandpa says, “When are you planning to return to earth?”

“Soon as I finish this coffee,” Jesus says. “Pretty good, isn’t it.”

“Never tasted better in my life,” Grandpa says.

Finally Daddy lumbers up to bed, and it’s Mother and me. The street is dark except for our porch, bathed in light, like the bridge of a great ship plying the dark ocean waters.

She’s a night owl, like me. She understands: we don’t all have to sleep the same hours. We’re not dairy cattle.

“Would you care for a glass of ginger ale?” she says.

“That would be nice, thank you.”

For one shining moment I can imagine myself an only child. Mother and I are in New York City, our penthouse at the Chadwick Arms. The Lake Wobegon water tower is the Empire State Building. I’m a writer for *The New Yorker*. A close personal friend of A.J. Liebling. He and Mother and I went to a Broadway play last night and went to a tiny restaurant, L’Etoile du Nord, that A.J. knew about and we stayed until 3:00 A.M., laughing, reminiscing about Paris, talking about our magazine pals, Audax Minor, Elwyn Brooks White, James Thurber, George Price, the long-winded lady, Genêt, the whole crowd. Wonderful. Glorious.

And then Mother breaks the mood.

“I don’t understand why you always have to be so different,” she says.

“Everybody’s different.”

“I remember you tearing around the farm and playing in the haymow. You seemed so happy. And now—”

Mother is lost in thought for a moment.

I ask her why Aunt Eva is so different.

“Who told you that?”

“Nobody has to tell me. I can see it for myself. Our whole family is odd, but she takes the cake.”

Mother looks into her glass of ginger ale and shakes it a little so the ice clinks.

“Eva is a little odd, but that’s because she’s not right in the head. I thought you knew that. She was just born that way, and that’s all there is to it.”

I wish I didn’t know this about Eva. I wish it didn’t make any difference to me, but it does.

“She has spells when she needs to be left alone. You knew that, didn’t you?”

I can remember Eva’s going to her room. I didn’t know it was because she was crazy.

“Does she hear voices?”

“I don’t know. We don’t talk about it.”

“Has she seen a doctor?”

**“Be sure your sin
will find you out.”
That’s Aunt Flo’s
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but don’t kid
yourself, the lights
will come on
someday.**

"She won't go, and Grandma won't tell her to. They're afraid she might be put in an institution."

And then there are footsteps on the walk and in comes Aunt Flo in her yellow housedress and slippers, carrying a big black umbrella. "I saw your light was on," she says. It's late: eleven-thirty. "They say it may rain tonight," she says. She plops down on Daddy's daybed. Mother goes to get her a glass of ginger ale. Aunt Flo asks what I'm up to this summer. She already knows, but I tell her. Not much. Taking care of the yard. Writing sports for the paper.

Aunt Flo knows everything about Eva, I'm sure, and could tell me Eva's whole story, but she won't, so there's no point in bringing up the subject.

Aunt Flo knows everyone's story, and she doesn't mince words. People try to cover up their sins, they lie like rugs, but Aunt Flo knows what time it is. "Poppycock," she says. "Horsefeathers." "Balloon juice." What's His Face and Miss Coles, the two English teachers—those two are shacking up and anybody with eyes in his head can see it. Remember the Lutheran pastor who went guest

preaching to Granite Falls and came home with a love note *in his Bible*? Remember that? Aunt Flo had him figured out from the git-go. That man was a secret only to himself and an open book to anyone who looked him straight in the eye. You can tell by the eyes. Flo can.

She gets up from the daybed and walks the length of the porch, reminiscing about that pastor and all those women who came to him for spiritual guidance. "Guidance!" she snorts. "The man only knew one direction and that was toward the bedroom!"

This is her great theme: all the Lake Wobegon men who got caught in adultery and never expected to. One after another, caught at the old game like a weasel in the moonlight, held up, dangling from the leg trap, and people cry *Shame! Shame!* and among the shamers is a man thinking, *Lucky for me that I covered my tracks. Nobody'll ever find out.* And they sniff him out two weeks later, and tar and feather him and ride him around on a rail, and of the men carrying the rail one thinks, *Good I burned those letters when I did.* Two weeks later they find two unburnt letters addressed to Angel Eyes, and they put him in stocks,

and people throw dead fish and used fruit at him and buckets of slime and entrails, and one of the main hurlers thinks, *If I'm ever caught, which I won't be, I'll deny everything.* And two weeks later he's caught. He denies it, but they have found the pink garter, the hotel-room key, and he is made to walk around with a deceased pelican hanging around his neck, and the man who ties the pelican to him thinks, *I'll call her and tell her I can't meet her again until after this all blows over.*

And so it goes. One after another. Each one dumber than the one ahead of him in the parade. Ping-Pong balls for brains! Pudding heads! And for what? A roll in the hay. A ride on the Ferris wheel. Wham bam, thank you, ma'am. For this they're willing to give up everything? But that's men. Men believe in their hearts that God will make an exception in their case and look the other way.

I sit listening to Aunt Flo as she paces, like a captain walking the bridge of his ship, looking out past the lawn and the street and the distant red light of the water tower to some stormy seas ahead in the stilly night, and it slowly dawns on me that I am being preached to, and not about adultery but about *High School Orgies* and the Sunday-morning wine I sneaked after the Breaking of Bread and everything else. Men prefer darkness to light because their hearts are evil, and in the dark the truth is less troublesome. You can invent beautiful illusions. Don't grow up to be like them, young man.



IN THE PRESS BOX

I got to the ballpark an hour early for the Sunday game so I'd have time to write some possible leads—*The resurgent Lake Wobegon Whippets, coming off a nifty win last week against Bowlus, nearly made it two in a row Sunday but alas fell short against the Bards of Avon*—and strolled up the battered wood stairs and into the grandstand and stopped, struck by the beauty of a diamond on a summer day. So green, and the infield dirt raked smooth and watered to a deeper shade of brown. And at the top of the stands, the seat of privilege and royalty, the press box, fifteen feet long, with four big windows behind the foul net that swooped up from the top of the backstop to the press-box roof.

"I don't have the key to that up there," Mike the groundskeeper said. He was rolling and raking the third-base line so that bunts would roll foul. "I wash my hands of it. That's Jim Dandy's bailiwick. He installed the locks on the door. Those aren't my locks."

"When will he come?"

"Who knows? They bring in this two-bit skirt-chaser in tight pants and a duck-butt hairdo to handle the PA announcing, who by the way doesn't know a sacrifice bunt from his sacroiliac—he mispronounces names, gets the score wrong, you name it. All I can say is, don't come to me about it, okay?"

"I have to get into the press box."

"Climb in the window."

So I stood on the seats below and raised the window and crawled inside.

Inside was a splintered plywood table with thousands of cigarette-butt burns and numerous dark rings from beer bottles. An old silver microphone and amplifier and a child's phonograph sat on it with *Prop. of J. Dandy* written on them, on strips of masking tape. On the back wall were scrawled hundreds of insults and salacious messages and desperate dirty thoughts, phone numbers for Donna and Tina and LaVerne and Dolores, some with a word or two about each one's specialty. There were two chairs, an easy chair covered with an Army blanket and an old busted folding chair. I figured that one was for me.

As one-thirty approached, the fans filed in, like men taking their places at a urinal, nobody getting too close to his neighbors. The gloomy old diehards in the plaid shirts and feed caps camped behind the home dugout; the teenagers sat behind the visitors' dugout, where they could rag on them; the fathers and sons were directly back of home plate; and the gamblers sat at the very top of the stands, along with the drunks. I busied myself making descriptive notes on the pre-game spectacle—*The crowd trickled in like rivulets of muddy water on a hillside of seats ... The crowd fluttered in like birds of many feathers settling down on a bank of phone wires ... The little white spheroids made expressive arcs in the air, higher or lower, as if the throwers were speaking a geometrical language.* I made a list of words to work into the story to give it tone—*auspicious, harry, thwart, drowse, entreaty, pliant, incipient, plaintive, sortie*—and then I heard the key in the padlock, and the bolt opened, and there stood Mr. Jim Dandy, in a seer-sucker suit and a straw boater and white bucks, mirror shades, his curly black hair slicked back on the sides. He was carrying two brown-paper sacks that clinked when he set them down.

Mr. Dandy took off the shades and gave me the hairy eyeball. "What in the hell are you doing in here?" he said. "There better not be anything missing."

"I'm writing up the game for the *Herald Star*." My voice came out a little squeakier than I was hoping for.

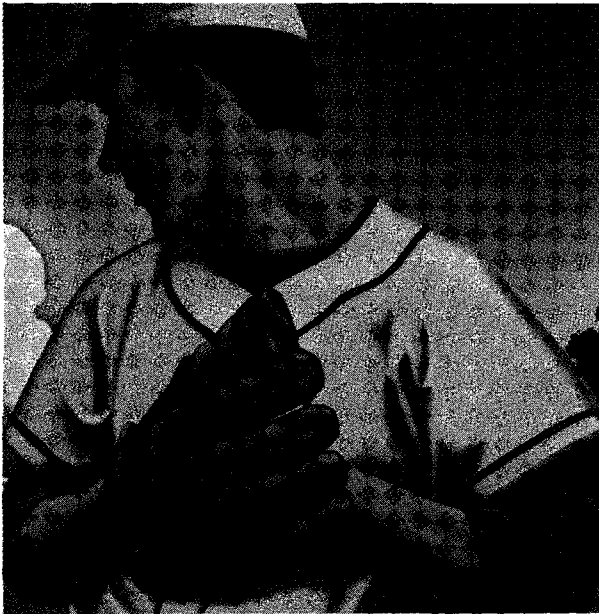
"Next time ask permission before you go barging in."

It was already one-thirty when Mr. Dandy appeared. Game time. The ump behind home plate turned and looked up toward us and waved. Jim Dandy

Inside was a splintered plywood table with thousands of cigarette-butt burns and numerous dark rings from beer bottles. An old silver microphone and amplifier and a child's phonograph sat on it with *Prop. of J. Dandy* written on them.

eased down in his easy chair and switched on the microphone and blew into it—people jumped as if a bomb had gone off—and said in his six-foot-deep voice, “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Wally (Old Hard Hands) Bunsen Memorial Ball Park, home of your Lake Wobegon WHIPPETS! Let’s honor America and rise and salute the Stars and Stripes and join together in our national anthem,” and he held the mike up to the phonograph and put the needle down and a scratchy version of “The Star-Spangled Banner” blasted out. I wondered how many of the fans were aware of his eminence. Meanwhile, he fetched from one sack a bottle of vodka and a bottle of tomato juice and splashed equal parts of each into a paper cup and tossed it down before the home of the brave and shouted into the mike, “Let’s play ball!” The crowd below let out a sickly cheer as the Whippets trotted onto the field and Roger Guppy strode to the mound and picked up the resin bag and threw his warm-ups.

“That’s my brother pitching,” said Jim Dandy. “You be sure to treat him right. I don’t want to be reading snide comments just because he throws a gopher ball or two.” “Oh, right,” I thought. “Of course.” Jim Dandy was his stage name. He was one of those Guppys, from up in Millet.



Jim Dandy had a little black moustache that suffered from a hair shortage. It was raggedy in a couple of places, and he kept fussing with it. He had doused himself in a syrup-sweet cologne, but his breath smelled like he’d been eating dead raccoons. It was rank. He removed his jacket and hung it on a nail. He freshened up his drink with more vodka. He asked, “What’s your name?” and I told him.

“I gotta keep the place locked up because we store product up here.” He nodded toward a stack of cardboard boxes in the corner, marked DANGEROUS/DO NOT OPEN/THIS MEANS YOU!

“You’ve heard of my singing group, right? The Doo Dads?” I nodded. “Yes, sir,” I said. I was about to say more about this, but he wasn’t looking at me, he was scanning the crowd for hot babes. And then he picked up a pair of binoculars for a closer look. “Nice set of maracas over behind first base,” he said. “Boy, I wouldn’t mind doing the cha-cha with those bazoongies! And

look at that honey in the blue cap. Oh, baby. Mr. Jim Dandy would sure like to spend a few hours doing some bed dancing with you, darling.”

Roger set the Bards down in order, and when the first Whippet came up to bat, Mr. Dandy cried out his name—“RIGHT FIELDER WAYNE TOMMERDAHL!”—and let out a wolf howl as if to arouse fan fervor, but it was like trying to make whipped cream from skim milk. The fans made no more noise than if they were at a ploughing contest.

“Norwegians,” Mr. Dandy said. “I’ll tell you, when God created Norwegians, he was still learning. He used what he knew about sheep and gave them hands to drive a tractor and jerk off, and there you have it. The dumbest of the dumb. Men who go fishing for fun. Imagine it! Sitting in boats and staring at the water! You want to know what’s fun, kid? Walking across the parking lot with a nineteen-year-old babe to get in your car and take her to the beach. That is what makes for a happy man.

“Norwegians!

“Kid, if Elvis Presley had grown up among Norwegians, he’d still be driving a truck for a living. These people cannot be entertained in any way, shape, or form! I’d rather do a show for a herd of Holsteins! I’d rather sing for a bunch of brook trout!”

He got friendlier and more confidential as he got deeper into the vodka. He

joy give bold fashion think
model absurd sausage original young film
soon picture fiery shimmer glorious an
why form metal dazzle art &
see life am a live icon are try
symbol

passion

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“Norwegians,” Mr. Dandy said. “These people cannot be entertained in any way, shape, or form! I’d rather do a show for a herd of Holsteins! I’d rather sing for a bunch of brook trout!”

told me the story of his career. I tried not to listen to him, but he was hard to not listen to. When he wasn’t yakking, he was singing to himself, going *bip-m-bip-m-bip-a-bomp-bomp, hmmm-ba-dee-ba-dee-mmm-ba-dee, mmm-ba-dee-mmm-bomp-bomp*. After the second inning he dug into one of the cardboard boxes and got out a 45 and played it over the PA—

*You got a Ford, you’re on board.
A Chevrolet, you’re okay.*

Most of the crowd took the song as a minor annoyance, no cause for alarm, but a few heads turned to gaze our way, and one of them was Leonard Larsen, sitting next to his dad. Leonard peered up at me, trying to catch my eye, his hand raised, ready to wave, a tentative smile on his face. He was hoping I’d invite him up to sit in the press box with me and Jim Dandy. No way, José. He shielded his eyes with one hand and waved with the other, and I ignored him. *Plead all you want, pal. I’m here, you’re down there. That’s just how things are. No hitchhikers. And if you think it’s so great up here, guess again.*

There was a knock on the door. It was the bratwurst man. Mr. Dandy bought four with onions and mustard and ate them fast, a brat in two bites, and chewed with his mouth wide open and chased them with vodka and tomato juice, and then reached down for a coffee can and took out his whanger and peed into the can; meanwhile, he had the binoculars trained on the maracas below. “This is the life, isn’t it, kid?”

It seemed to be the life for him all right. Up high in the press box, getting a royal perspective on things, the green field of manly combat and the motley crowd of peons below. “Norwegians! They don’t even *contemplate* sex unless they’re too drunk to go fishing. Then they marry the ugliest woman in town so they won’t have to think about it too often. Or marry a pregnant woman to save themselves the time and trouble.” Then he spotted another woman in the crowd. “Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy, honey in the dish!” he cried. “Coupla mangoes on that babe! Oh, buttercups! Have mercy!” He had examined every female chest in the grandstand and had yet to see one he didn’t like. They were all good; there were no bad ones in the bunch.

He was halfway into the vodka now and getting more expansive by the minute, and it wasn’t even the fourth inning yet. He leaned back with his feet up on the table and the microphone on his chest and I told him who was next up to bat and he switched on the mike and announced it. A couple times I had to reach over and switch off the mike because he started commenting on the mangoes and maracas.

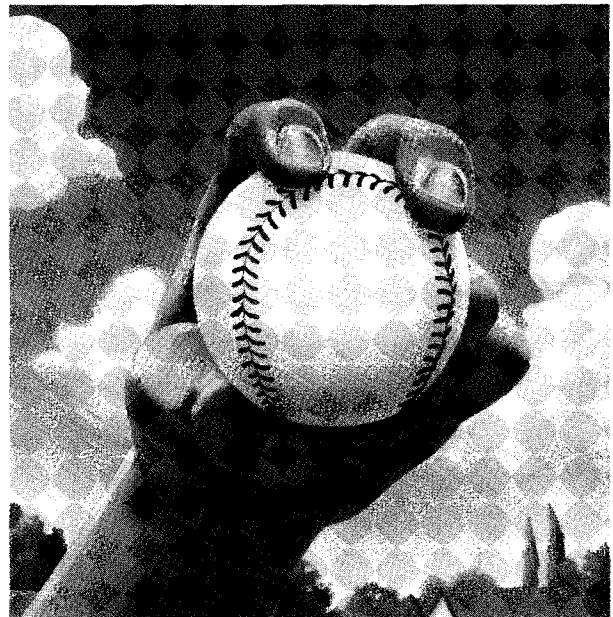
The Whippets had leaped into the lead on the strength of Roger’s shutting down Avon and also hitting a nice triple. Mr. Dandy announced the batters—“Leading off for Avon, second baseman Fred Lederer!”—and down below Leonard kept glancing up, trying to catch my eye, and the bratwurst man returned with four more dogs, slathered with mustard, and the vodka dwindled, and finally came the seventh-inning stretch, and Jim Dandy put a 45 on the turntable.

HOME BASE! (That’s the place!)
HOME BASE! (You win the race!)
I got to first when she gave me a kiss,
I got to second when I squeezed her like this!
I rounded second, I was going hard,
Slid into third and caught her off-guard,
I got a glimpse of nylon and lace
And I headed for HOME BASE!

Jim Dandy shoved the microphone over toward me. "Here, kid, have yourself a ball," he said. And then he was gone, disappeared into a passageway and out into the parking lot, and I heard his car start up, the big muffler snarling and the rear tires kicking up gravel. Nobody announced the players over the PA, and the crowd did not seem perturbed by the lack of this information. Leonard sidled into the press box after the eighth and tried to make chitchat. I told him I was busy. I said, "I'm on deadline."

THE FRESHMAN FIREBALLER

The Whippets won the game, and I worked Sunday night and Monday morning polishing my story, and made Roger Guppy a hero of the first order, a *rookie hooker*, a *blazing young southpaw*, a *Whippet rifleman*, a *freshman fireballer*, and Ronnie Piggott was a *fleet-footed shagger* who *patrolled the garden* and *garnered flies*, and the Perfesser became *the veteran speedster* and he came up to the dish and *got a ticket to first*, whereupon he *purloined second* and was in position to *waltz home* when Roger Guppy *larruped a mighty sacrifice fly deep in the garden*. The next inning Roger *snagged a scorcher at shoelace level* and *tossed the pill* to shortstop Rasmussen to set up a 1-6-3 DP, erasing an Avon rally. The old spitballer Ernie (*mound mainstay Ernie Sauer*) came in for Roger in the eighth and *toyed with the Avon stickman before giving him his walking papers*. Backstopper Milkman Boreen became a *slugger*, a *cloutsman*, a *lumberman*: he *applied the lumber to the ball*, *powering a homer and sending the Avon twirler to the showers*. Our boys drilled the ball, they hammered the ivory, kissed the apple, aired the orb, pummeled the pill, pasted the pellet, rammed the radish, tore into the tomato, slammed the spheroid, overpowered the oval, bounced a beaut into the bleachers, sent one by airmail. They donned their spikes and crossed bats with the foe and brought home the bacon. They rang the bell, stole the show, and took the verdict. They jolted the Bards, squelched their rally, settled their hash, and wowed the fans.



The big sister was steamed over my breaking into print in the *Herald Star* and complained bitterly to Daddy that she was pulling more than her fair share of the load, dishwashing-wise. She watched my yard work like a hawk for any sign of slackery and was overjoyed to point out a few incipient dandelions by the clothespoles. She told Mother that there definitely was smoke on my breath. And she snatched up the paper on Wednesday and opened it to the sports page ("WHIPPETS LIMN AVON, 5-4, AS GUPPY PITCHES 9-HITTER") and read it out loud, my first story, shrieking at every poetic turn of phrase. "Portside flinger Roger Guppy twirled a nifty nine-hitter—'Twirled! Did he have a baton? Were there tassels on his hat? Why don't you just say 'pitched'?" I liked *twirled* because it lent some artfulness to the pitching. But there was no explaining that to her. "Local baseballites were treated to a thrilling sixth-stanza swatfest by sticksmiths Piggott and Tommerdahl, who larruped the leather for back-to-back round-trippers, hoisting the home nine from the cellar to sixth rung in the New Soo circuit."

It was a small story, six paragraphs and box score, sandwiched between a column of Cards of Thanks ("The Joseph Schrunk family wishes to thank everyone at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church for their kindness and prayers during our father's recent illness") and an article from the state home-extension service about how to liven up your summer dinner table with colorful centerpieces made from milk cartons, and it was a real bell-ringer, including

**Uncle Al stands,
 thanking the Lord
 for His Precious
 Word that sufficeth
 for all our needs,
 surely. Maybe it
 sufficeth for them.
 But it doth not
 suffice for me.
 I want more. I want
 to kiss girls, just to
 name one.**

the line "an auspicious sortie behooving incipient contenders as the Whippets thwarted the pliant Bards, to plaintive entreaties from the drowsy crowd."

To the great surprise of all, the Whippets won their first three games, with Roger on the mound every time. He was a real snake-stomper. The opposition was accustomed to feasting on the big meatballs served up by the Whippets' knuckleballer, Ernie Sauer, and instead here was a barn-burning aces-high pitcher who tossed his hair back and wound up, his right knee tucked under his chin, and kicked and threw a hard one under your chin and one across the plate, low and slow, and a third one breaking up and in, and the umpire pointed you to the dugout and off you went, carrying the bat like you had never seen one before.

I sat in the press box and tried not to breathe too much of Jim Dandy's cigar smoke and gave Roger a nice write-up and also Ronnie and Milkman and Fred Schue and even the Perfesser if he didn't mess up too bad. The others, like Boots Merkel and Orville Tollefson, there wasn't much to say about. They were dead weight in the batting order, and in the field they were obstructions, like trees or boulders. Hit a ball at any of them, it bounced off.

TOMATOES

It was a little envelope, the stamp slightly askew, the flap taped shut, and inside was half an index card, and on the back, in her small, precise hand:

Gary,

The tomatoes are ripe and awaiting harvest. I am avidly following your stories in the newspaper thanks to Flo, who is diligent about forwarding copies, and I must say I enjoy them tremendously, and so does Mother. You are making baseball fanatics of us both. We miss you keenly, Mother & I, & wish you here, tho of course you are all grown up now & busy with your own affairs, but we do wish sincerely that you could spare a day (or two) for yr old relatives. Do let us know when you can visit. All our love, Eva

The next Sunday morning, among the Brethren at the Breaking of Bread, sitting in the circle in Aunt Flo's living room, I try not to look at Aunt Eva in her Sunday outfit for fear she is looking at me. I look at Kate instead, then Sugar, then Flo. Uncle Al stands, hands clasped behind his back, head bowed, moving up and down on his toes, and prays, thanking the Lord for His Precious Word that sufficeth for all our needs, surely. Maybe it sufficeth for them. But it doth not suffice for me. I want more. I want to kiss girls, just to name one. To sit in a car with a girl, my arm across the back of the seat, my right hand stroking her hair, and kiss her on the lips, our lips parted, my tongue in her mouth.

To go to the University of Minnesota and study writing and meet girls who are also interested in writing and kiss them.

To have my own ideas about things, especially about girls.

But the Sanctified are hard on independent thinkers. Thinking is something that is simply not supposed to happen. You're supposed to read Paul's epistles and conform your life to them, the way you'd read a book about how to play the violin and then, by George, sit down and play the thing. Just do it. A writer in the Brethren is like a fish wanting to sing—you have to leave the lake and be eaten by a singer.

Eva corners me afterward, when Grandma is talking to Mother. She leans close, and I smell that smell so beloved to me when I was little.

"You seem to be avoiding us."

I pretend not to know what she means.

"I brought you up from a pup. I know when you're being sneaky. You can't fool me."

DESIGN



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**Aunt Eva asked
about the entire
family and wanted a
day-by-day account
of their activities,
and then she said,
“Come and let’s
get you a bag of
tomatoes to take
home. Those town
tomatoes taste
soapy to me.”**

I say that I have been extremely busy with my yard work and writing for the newspaper.

Eva and I stand in the doorway to Aunt Flo’s kitchen, and the others drift away from us. Uncle Al leads some of them to the back yard to look at his roses, and Aunt Flo pours the wine back in the jug and puts it on the shelf. The remains of the bread she drops into the wastebasket! A revelation. The Body of Christ, thrown out with the garbage—I can’t wait to bring this to the attention of the big sister.

“Well, I suppose Mother is anxious to get going,” Eva says. She tells me to come and collect some tomatoes before they get mealy.

“I’ll see you soon.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” she says.

I feel bad about her, thinking how lonely it must be on the farm with only Grandma to talk to and how good to me Eva always was and how close we were in that bed.

I get out clean paper after dinner and write a poem to her, which I type up cleanly on the Underwood, double-spaced, on my best white paper.

*On August days when I was young
My aunt and I in bright sunshine
Took the pail from where it hung
And walked among the leafy vines.
And reaching down, she quickly drew
One red tomato from its nest,
The finest one that ever grew,
And wiping it across her breast
She gave it to me to enjoy—
And O the juices hot and sweet—
And on that day the happy boy
Tastes where earth and heaven meet.
Of food or love if ever I should be in want—
I’ll think of that bright day and you, dear aunt.*

I sent it to her on Rural Route 1, Lake Wobegon, and a few days later received a note:

Dearest Gary, Our thanks for the poem. I thot it quite good tho of course I’m no authority in these matters. Mother keeps asking when you will honor us with your presence and I tell her that you are occupied with your duties at the paper and all, but do want you to know that if you could spare even an hour you would make two old ladies very happy. I am making banana bread and it’s not much fun without you here to enjoy a slice of it. Let us have a look at you. Kindly greet your dear family. All our love, Eva

So I hopped on my bicycle and rode out to the farm. Eva was kneeling in the yard, weeding a bed of petunias inside a truck tire, and when she looked up I saw a flash of dread in her face, her old fear of strangers, and then she grinned and jumped up and ran and gave me a hug.

“Let me look at you.” She held me at arm’s length. “My, you are a feast to the eyes.”

She was the only person in the world who would ever say such a thing to me. Nobody else considered me even a light snack to the eyes.

She led me by the hand and sat me down on the front step and grilled me about the Whippets and whether the Guppy boy was really as good as I said in

the paper, and after we exhausted that topic, she asked about the entire family and wanted a day-by-day account of their activities, and then she said, "Come and let's get you a bag of tomatoes to take home. Those town tomatoes taste soapy to me."

We walked down that long dirt road I'd walked with her ever since I learned to walk, and there was the garden, majestic in the sunlight, everything where it should be and always had been since Adam and Eve.

Grandma was talking about death these days, Eva said, and planning her funeral and which hymns should be sung and who should preach.

And then Eva said, "I don't think I would last two weeks around here without Mother," and she sat down in the dirt and got out a hanky and dabbed at her eyes. "I told Mother that if she's intending to go then she can plan mine, too. Have a double funeral."

She made me promise not to tell anybody about any of this. I promised.

"A lot of people would clap their hands to see me dead. They could sell off the place and pocket the money and never have to lower themselves to coming out here to visit us poor old hillbillies." I patted her shoulder a little, and then she jumped up, mad, and said, "People move to town and suddenly they're too good for the likes of us! Our own flesh and blood. They buy a fancy house and expensive clothes—I'm no dummy, I know how much they pay!"

I got the idea she was talking about Mother. I said, "Nobody thinks they're better than you."

"They do so. Some people, you'd never know they were Christians, the way they look down on their poor shirttail relatives. I know what they're thinking. They think they're too *good* to put their little bottoms down on a wooden seat and do their business in a hole! *Too good for it!* Too good to eat home butchering! Have to buy their meat in a wrapper! My own relatives! I'm just plain ashamed of them. I wish I'd never lay eyes on them again."

And then she started patting my head and saying how I was her favorite person in the whole world and always had been like a son to her, her baby, and the relative who was most *like* her and the only one she really cared about aside from Grandma and how it would kill her if I ever turned my back on her as others had done, and if she thought I would do that, then she'd rather go up to the house right this minute and drink a glass of poison.

"I mean it," she said. She kept a big brown bottle of poison in her bedroom in case a rapist came, and if I was intending to high-hat her as others had done, she'd go up there and drink it and ask God to forgive me and then go be with the Lord in heaven.

"Nothing wrong with wanting to be in heaven," she said. "I could be there in fifteen minutes. Cast off this old body and get a new one. What's wrong with that? I'd wait for you there."

This was too much for me. My eyes got red and itchy and I wanted to run away. She was clutching my arm. She said, "You're the dearest thing there is, precious. I love you more than I can say, precious. I want you to promise me you'll always come out and visit, no matter what."

I made a sort of agreeable sound in my throat.

"Promise," she said.

I said that she was wrong about people looking down on her. I said that everybody liked her very much. This was not true, but I said it in a pleasant tone of voice.



I rode along no-handed, and as I came to the first mailbox, I took a tomato out and threw it sidearm and missed, but I hit the big yellow sign with the curved arrow and went around the curve fast and hit the curve sign on the other side.

She had gotten up from a sitting position and now was kneeling in the dirt, sitting back on her heels, tomatoes in the lap of her old print dress, her white stockings rolled down to the ankles, her hair wispy under the pins, the blue bandanna scarf, straps of her underthings hanging down and visible in her sleeve, the hair on her arms, her tears, her red nose, the warts on her neck, and suddenly I felt a faint revulsion for her. My crazy aunt. I stood a few feet away, holding my bucket, wanting to go home, wanting not to have heard anything she said.

"If Mother were to die, you're all I have left in this world. If you turned your back on me, I couldn't bear it. I couldn't."

I always knew Aunt Eva to be an oddball, what with the backward psalm, the eighty-seven counties, the hypnotizing of chickens, her fear of strangers, but the talk of poison was in a whole new category. They would be talking about us at the Bon Marché for years to come. The people with the lunatic aunt who drank the rat poison.

She said she'd had a dream that I was grown up, wearing a very expensive suit and tie, walking in a crowd of strangers down a city street where she stood alone on the corner, hungry, lost, scared, and I walked right past her, not recognizing her, my own flesh and blood. She spoke my name and I turned and said, "Who are you?" And she ran away into the woods and the woods stood for her own death. "In the dream I knew I was about to die, and I wasn't afraid," she said. "It was nice."

And as she said it, I knew that the dream was real. That was exactly what was going to happen someday.

I got on my bike with a big bag of tomatoes clutched in one arm and I kissed her good-bye and wheeled away and onto the paved road and down the hill and over the crick and I knew that if she took arsenic I didn't want to be around or know anything about it or even attend the funeral. But Grandma looked good, her color was good, her mind was pretty sharp. If she could hold on for another ten years then I'd be twenty-four, and by that time a person knows what to do about these things. It was a fine day, no time to be thinking about funerals. I rode along no-handed, and as I came to the first mailbox, I took a tomato out and threw it sidearm and missed, but I hit the big yellow sign with the curved arrow and went around the curve fast, still no hands on the handlebars, and hit the curve sign on the other side of the curve. The crowd of strangers in Aunt Eva's dream was a crowd of friends of mine in some city I hadn't seen yet but would see, and I would be happy there. *Yes! Happy!* Strangers to her but dear



friends to me. People who don't sit around planning their funerals and complaining about the cost of butter nowadays and waiting for the Lord's Return and agonizing over every light left burning in an empty room. My friends will be of another race entirely, a more joyful race, and I intend to be happy right along with them, and if you expect me to sit and weep and mope in the damp and gloom, you've got another think coming, by God—and I hit the STOP sign where the township road met the county road, splattered tomato all over, and missed one mailbox and then hit three in a row, for a record of six hits and two misses, and hit the RAILROAD CROSSING signs on both sides of the old Great Northern spur, and was coming in sight of town, up to the tree between the road and the swamp where Uncle Al had nailed the FOR ALL HAVE SINNED AND COME SHORT OF THE GLORY OF GOD sign (“Surely,” Grandpa said, “surely he has sense enough not to—” and Jesus looked down and said He believed I was going to hit it and of course He, being part of the triune God, was right), and the big tomato made a lovely looping arc and splatted right between COME and SHORT and left a bright-red mark like blood, and now I was nine-and-two and the WELCOME TO LAKE WOBEGON was a cinch for No. 10 and the SLOW CHILDREN was No. 11 and then, just for the principle of the thing, I stopped to throw my last three tomatoes as high in the air as I could, to hear them hit the asphalt. If someone had come by and stopped and asked why I was wasting all those perfectly good tomatoes, I would have said, “Because they're my tomatoes and because it makes me HAPPY! Let's hear it for Happiness! and a *splanch* and a *splinch* and a mighty *spil-woshish*. Grandpa turned away from the window. He couldn't bear to see it. For somebody who was in heaven, he sure worried a lot. ▀



Keeping safe or state of being kept safe
saf·e·ty (săf'tē) *n., pl. -ties*. 1. The state of be-
ing safe. 2. A device designed to prevent ac-
cidents. 3. Football **a.** A play in which a
member of the offensive team downs the ball
behind his own goal line. **b.** One of 2 defen-
sive backs.
saf·e·ty *n.* A shatterproof material



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ROUGH BEAST

Don't tell a camel about need and want.

Look at the big lips
pursed
in perpetual kiss,
the dangerous lashes
of a born coquette.

The camel is an animal
grateful for less.

It keeps to itself
the hidden spring choked with grass,
the sharpest thorn
on the sweetest stalk.

When a voice was heard crying in the wilderness,

when God spoke
from the burning bush,

the camel was the only animal
to answer back.

Dune on stilts,
it leans into the long horizon,
bloodhounding

the secret caches of watermelon

brought forth like manna
from the sand.

It will bear no false gods
before it:

not the trader
who cinches its hump
with rope,
nor the tourist.

It has a clear sense of its place in the world:

after water and watermelon,
heat and light,
silence and science,

it is the last great hope,

Noah's ark,

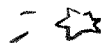
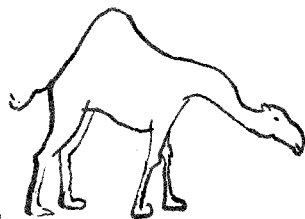
Virgin of the oasis
who brings forth milk
under a deadly sky.

Year after year
it follows the bright stars
east, falls to its knees
for the lowliest king.

Except, of course, when the top lip
lifts like a curtain
on a mighty sneer.

Then you may hear,
out of the mouth of that rough beast,
the walls of the wide world
collapse.

—JEAN MONAHAN



BYSTANDERS TO GENOCIDE

WHY THE UNITED STATES LET THE RWANDAN TRAGEDY HAPPEN

The author's exclusive interviews with scores of the participants in the decision-making, together with her analysis of a cache of newly declassified documents, yield a chilling narrative of self-serving caution and flaccid will—and countless missed opportunities to mitigate a colossal crime

BY SAMANTHA POWER

Photographs by James Nachtwey

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I. PEOPLE SITTING IN OFFICES

In the course of a hundred days in 1994 the Hutu government of Rwanda and its extremist allies very nearly succeeded in exterminating the country's Tutsi minority. Using firearms, machetes, and a variety of garden implements, Hutu militiamen, soldiers, and ordinary citizens murdered some 800,000 Tutsi and politically moderate Hutu. It was the fastest, most efficient killing spree of the twentieth century.

A few years later, in a series in *The New Yorker*, Philip Gourevitch recounted in horrific detail the story of the genocide and the world's failure to stop it. President Bill Clinton, a famously avid reader, expressed shock. He sent copies of Gourevitch's articles to his second-term national-security adviser, Sandy Berger. The articles bore confused, angry, searching queries in the margins. "Is what he's saying true?" Clinton wrote with a thick black felt-tip pen beside heavily underlined paragraphs. "How did this happen?" he asked, adding, "I want to get to the bottom of this." The President's urgency and outrage were oddly timed. As the terror in Rwanda had unfolded, Clinton had shown virtually no interest in stopping the genocide, and his Administration had stood by as the death toll rose into the hundreds of thousands.

Why did the United States not do more for the Rwandans at the time of the killings? Did the President really not know about the genocide, as his marginalia suggested? Who were the people in his Administration who made the life-and-death decisions that dictated U.S. policy? Why did they decide (or decide not to decide) as they did? Were any voices inside or outside the U.S. government demanding that the United States do more? If so, why weren't they

heeded? And most crucial, what could the United States have done to save lives?

So far people have explained the U.S. failure to respond to the Rwandan genocide by claiming that the United States didn't know what was happening, that it knew but didn't care, or that regardless of what it knew there was nothing useful to be done. The account that follows is based on a three-year investigation involving sixty interviews with senior, mid-level, and junior State Department, Defense Department, and National Security Council officials who helped to shape or inform U.S. policy. It also reflects dozens of interviews with Rwandan, European, and United Nations officials and with peacekeepers, journalists, and nongovernmental workers in Rwanda. Thanks to the National Security Archive (www.nsarchive.org), a nonprofit organization that uses the Freedom of Information Act to secure the release of classified U.S. documents, this account also draws on hundreds of pages of newly available government records. This material provides a clearer picture than was previously possible of the interplay among people, motives, and events. It reveals that the U.S. government knew enough about the genocide early on to save lives, but passed up countless opportunities to intervene.

In March of 1998, on a visit to Rwanda, President Clinton issued what would later be known as the "Clinton apology," which was actually a carefully hedged acknowledgment. He spoke to the crowd assembled on the tarmac at Kigali Airport: "We come here today partly in recognition of the fact that we in the United States and the world community did not do as much as we could have and should have done to try to limit what occurred" in Rwanda.

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This implied that the United States had done a good deal but not quite enough. In reality the United States did much more than fail to send troops. It led a successful effort to remove most of the UN peacekeepers who were already in Rwanda. It aggressively worked to block the subsequent authorization of UN reinforcements. It refused to use its technology to jam radio broadcasts that were a crucial instrument in the coordination and perpetuation of the genocide. And even as, on average, 8,000 Rwandans were being butchered each day, U.S. officials shunned the term “genocide,” for fear of being obliged to act. The United States in fact did virtually nothing “to try to limit what occurred.” Indeed, staying out of Rwanda was an explicit U.S. policy objective.

With the grace of one grown practiced at public remorse, the President gripped the lectern with both hands and looked across the dais at the Rwandan officials and survivors who surrounded him. Making eye contact and shaking his head, he explained, “It may seem strange to you here, especially the many of you who lost members of your family, but all over the world there were people like me sitting in offices, day after day after day, who *did not fully appreciate* [pause] the depth [pause] and the speed [pause] with which you were being engulfed by this *unimaginable* terror.”

Clinton chose his words with characteristic care. It was true that although top U.S. officials could not help knowing the basic facts—thousands of Rwandans were dying every day—that were being reported in the morning papers, many did not “fully appreciate” the meaning. In the first three weeks of the genocide the most influential American policymakers portrayed (and, they insist, perceived) the deaths not as atrocities or the components and symptoms of genocide but as wartime “casualties”—the deaths of combatants or those caught between them in a civil war.

Yet this formulation avoids the critical issue of whether Clinton and his close advisers might reasonably have been expected to “fully appreciate” the true dimensions and nature of the massacres. During the first three days of the killings U.S. diplomats in Rwanda reported back to Washington that well-armed extremists were intent on eliminating the Tutsi. And the American press spoke of the door-to-door hunting of unarmed civilians. By the end of the second week informed nongovernmental groups had already begun to call on the Administration to use the term “genocide,” causing diplomats and lawyers at the State Department to begin debating the word’s applicability soon thereafter. In order not to appreciate that genocide or something close to it was under way, U.S. officials had to ignore public reports and internal intelligence and debate.

The story of U.S. policy during the genocide in Rwanda is not a story of willful complicity with evil. U.S. officials did not sit around and conspire to allow genocide to happen. But whatever their convictions about “never again,” many of them did sit around, and they most certainly did allow genocide to happen. In examining how and why the United

States failed Rwanda, we see that without strong leadership the system will incline toward risk-averse policy choices. We also see that with the possibility of deploying U.S. troops to Rwanda taken off the table early on—and with crises elsewhere in the world unfolding—the slaughter never received the top-level attention it deserved. Domestic political forces that might have pressed for action were absent. And most U.S. officials opposed to American involvement in Rwanda were firmly convinced that they were doing all they could—and, most important, all they *should*—in light of competing American interests and a highly circumscribed understanding of what was “possible” for the United States to do.

One of the most thoughtful analyses of how the American system can remain predicated on the noblest of values while allowing the vilest of crimes was offered in 1971 by a brilliant and earnest young foreign-service officer who had just resigned from the National Security Council to protest the 1970 U.S. invasion of Cambodia. In an article in *Foreign Policy*, “The Human Reality of Realpolitik,” he and a colleague analyzed the process whereby American policymakers with moral sensibilities could have waged a war of such immoral consequence as the one in Vietnam. They wrote,

The answer to that question begins with a basic intellectual approach which views foreign policy as a lifeless, bloodless set of abstractions. “Nations,” “interests,” “influence,” “prestige”—all are disembodied and dehumanized terms which encourage easy inattention to the real people whose lives our decisions affect or even end.

Policy analysis excluded discussion of human consequences. “It simply is not *done*,” the authors wrote. “Policy—good, steady policy—is made by the ‘tough-minded.’ To talk of suffering is to lose ‘effectiveness,’ almost to lose one’s grip. It is seen as a sign that one’s ‘rational’ arguments are weak.”

In 1994, fifty years after the Holocaust and twenty years after America’s retreat from Vietnam, it was possible to believe that the system had changed and that talk of human consequences had become admissible. Indeed, when the machetes were raised in Central Africa, the White House official primarily responsible for the shaping of U.S. foreign policy was one of the authors of that 1971 critique: Anthony Lake, President Clinton’s first-term national-security adviser. The genocide in Rwanda presented Lake and the rest of the Clinton team with an opportunity to prove that “good, steady policy” could be made in the interest of saving lives.

II. THE PEACEKEEPERS

Rwanda was a test for another man as well: Romeo Dallaire, then a major general in the Canadian army who at the time of the genocide was the commander of the UN Assistance Mission in Rwanda. If ever there was a peacekeeper who believed wholeheartedly in the promise of humanitarian action, it was Dallaire. A broad-shouldered

French-Canadian with deep-set sky-blue eyes, Dallaire has the thick, calloused hands of one brought up in a culture that prizes soldiering, service, and sacrifice. He saw the United Nations as the embodiment of all three.

Before his posting to Rwanda Dallaire had served as the commandant of an army brigade that sent peacekeeping battalions to Cambodia and Bosnia, but he had never seen actual combat himself. "I was like a fireman who has never been to a fire, but has dreamed for years about how he would fare when the fire came," the fifty-five-year-old Dallaire recalls. When, in the summer of 1993, he received the phone call from UN headquarters offering him the Rwanda posting, he was ecstatic. "It was answering the aim of my life," he says. "It's *all* you've been waiting for."

Dallaire was sent to command a UN force that would help to keep the peace in Rwanda, a nation the size of Vermont, which was known as "the land of a thousand hills" for its rolling terrain. Before Rwanda achieved independence from Belgium, in 1962, the Tutsi, who made up 15 percent of the populace, had enjoyed a privileged status. But independence ushered in three decades of Hutu rule, under which Tutsi were systematically discriminated against

But Dallaire knew nothing of the precariousness of the Arusha Accords. When he made a preliminary reconnaissance trip to Rwanda, in August of 1993, he was told that the country was committed to peace and that a UN presence was essential. A visit with extremists, who preferred to eradicate Tutsi rather than cede power, was not on Dallaire's itinerary. Remarkably, no UN officials in New York thought to give Dallaire copies of the alarming reports from the international investigators.

The sum total of Dallaire's intelligence data before that first trip to Rwanda consisted of one encyclopedia's summary of Rwandan history, which Major Brent Beardsley, Dallaire's executive assistant, had snatched at the last minute from his local public library. Beardsley says, "We flew to Rwanda with a Michelin road map, a copy of the Arusha agreement, and that was it. We were under the impression that the situation was quite straightforward: there was one cohesive government side and one cohesive rebel side, and they had come together to sign the peace agreement and had then requested that we come in to help them implement it."

Though Dallaire gravely underestimated the tensions

U. S. officials did not sit around and conspire to allow genocide to happen. But whatever their convictions about "never again," many of them did sit around, and they most certainly did allow genocide to happen.

and periodically subjected to waves of killing and ethnic cleansing. In 1990 a group of armed exiles, mainly Tutsi, who had been clustered on the Ugandan border, invaded Rwanda. Over the next several years the rebels, known as the Rwandan Patriotic Front, gained ground against Hutu government forces. In 1993 Tanzania brokered peace talks, which resulted in a power-sharing agreement known as the Arusha Accords. Under its terms the Rwandan government agreed to share power with Hutu opposition parties and the Tutsi minority. UN peacekeepers would be deployed to patrol a cease-fire and assist in demilitarization and demobilization as well as to help provide a secure environment, so that exiled Tutsi could return. The hope among moderate Rwandans and Western observers was that Hutu and Tutsi would at last be able to coexist in harmony.

Hutu extremists rejected these terms and set out to terrorize Tutsi and also those Hutu politicians supportive of the peace process. In 1993 several thousand Rwandans were killed, and some 9,000 were detained. Guns, grenades, and machetes began arriving by the plane-load. A pair of international commissions—one sent by the United Nations, the other by an independent collection of human-rights organizations—warned explicitly of a possible genocide.

brewing in Rwanda, he still felt that he would need a force of 5,000 to help the parties implement the terms of the Arusha Accords. But when his superiors warned him that the United States would never agree to pay for such a large deployment, Dallaire reluctantly trimmed his written request to 2,500. He remembers, "I was told, 'Don't ask for a brigade, because it ain't there.'"

Once he was actually posted to Rwanda, in October of 1993, Dallaire lacked not merely intelligence data and manpower but also institutional support. The small Department of Peacekeeping Operations in New York, run by the Ghanaian diplomat Kofi Annan, now the UN secretary general, was overwhelmed. Madeleine Albright, then the U.S. ambassador to the UN, recalls, "The global nine-one-one was always either busy or nobody was there." At the time of the Rwanda deployment, with a staff of a few hundred, the UN was posting 70,000 peacekeepers on seventeen missions around the world. Amid these widespread crises and logistical headaches the Rwanda mission had a very low status.

Life was not made easier for Dallaire or the UN peacekeeping office by the fact that American patience for peacekeeping was thinning. Congress owed half a billion dollars in UN dues and peacekeeping costs. It had tired of its obli-

gation to foot a third of the bill for what had come to feel like an insatiable global appetite for mischief and an equally insatiable UN appetite for missions. The Clinton Administration had taken office better disposed toward peacekeeping than any other Administration in U.S. history. But it felt that the Department of Peacekeeping Operations needed fixing and demanded that the UN "learn to say no" to chancy or costly missions.

Every aspect of the UN Assistance Mission in Rwanda was run on a shoestring. UNAMIR (the acronym by which it was known) was equipped with hand-me-down vehicles from the UN's Cambodia mission, and only eighty of the 300 that turned up were usable. When the medical supplies ran out, in March of 1994, New York said there was no cash for resupply. Very little could be procured locally, given that Rwanda was one of Africa's poorest nations. Replacement spare parts, batteries, and even ammunition could rarely be found. Dallaire spent some 70 percent of his time battling UN logistics.

Dallaire had major problems with his personnel, as well. He commanded troops, military observers, and civilian personnel from twenty-six countries. Though multinationality is meant to be a virtue of UN missions, the diversity yielded grave discrepancies in resources. Whereas Belgian troops turned up well armed and ready to perform the tasks assigned to them, the poorer contingents showed up "bare-assed," in Dallaire's words, and demanded that the United Nations suit them up. "Since nobody else was offering to send troops, we had to take what we could get," he says. When Dallaire expressed concern, he was instructed by a senior UN official to lower his expectations. He recalls, "I was told, 'Listen, General, you are NATO-trained. This is not NATO.'" Although some 2,500 UNAMIR personnel had arrived by early April of 1994, few of the soldiers had the kit they needed to perform even basic tasks.

The signs of militarization in Rwanda were so widespread that even without much of an intelligence-gathering capacity, Dallaire was able to learn of the extremists' sinister intentions. In January of 1994 an anonymous Hutu informant, said to be high up in the inner circles of the Rwandan government, had come forward to describe the rapid arming and training of local militias. In what is now referred to as the "Dallaire fax," Dallaire relayed to New York the informant's claim that Hutu extremists "had been ordered to register all the Tutsi in Kigali." "He suspects it is for their extermination," Dallaire wrote. "Example he gave was that in 20 minutes his personnel could kill up to 1000 Tutsis." "Jean-Pierre," as the informant became known, had said that the militia planned first to provoke and murder a number of Belgian peacekeepers, to "thus guarantee Belgian withdrawal from Rwanda." When Dallaire notified Kofi Annan's office that UNAMIR was poised to raid Hutu arms caches, Annan's deputy forbade him to do so. Instead Dallaire was instructed to notify the Rwandan President, Juvénal Habyarimana, and

the Western ambassadors of the informant's claims. Though Dallaire battled by phone with New York, and confirmed the reliability of the informant, his political masters told him plainly and consistently that the United States in particular would not support aggressive peacekeeping. (A request by the Belgians for reinforcements was also turned down.) In Washington, Dallaire's alarm was discounted. Lieutenant Colonel Tony Marley, the U.S. military liaison to the Arusha process, respected Dallaire but knew he was operating in Africa for the first time. "I thought that the neophyte meant well, but I questioned whether he knew what he was talking about," Marley recalls.

III. THE EARLY KILLINGS

On the evening of April 6, 1994, Romeo Dallaire was sitting on the couch in his bungalow residence in Kigali, watching CNN with Brent Beardsley. Beardsley was preparing plans for a national Sports Day that would match Tutsi rebel soldiers against Hutu government soldiers in a soccer game. Dallaire said, "You know, Brent, if the shit ever hit the fan here, none of this stuff would really matter, would it?" The next instant the phone rang. Rwandan President Habyarimana's *Mystère* Falcon jet, a gift from French President François Mitterrand, had just been shot down, with Habyarimana and Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira aboard. Dallaire and Beardsley raced in their UN jeep to Rwandan army headquarters, where a crisis meeting was under way.

Back in Washington, Kevin Aiston, the Rwanda desk officer, knocked on the door of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Prudence Bushnell and told her that the Presidents of Rwanda and Burundi had gone down in a plane crash. "Oh, shit," she said. "Are you sure?" In fact nobody was sure at first, but Dallaire's forces supplied confirmation within the hour. The Rwandan authorities quickly announced a curfew, and Hutu militias and government soldiers erected roadblocks around the capital.

Bushnell drafted an urgent memo to Secretary of State Warren Christopher. She was concerned about a probable outbreak of killing in both Rwanda and its neighbor Burundi. The memo read,

If, as it appears, both Presidents have been killed, there is a strong likelihood that widespread violence could break out in either or both countries, particularly if it is confirmed that the plane was shot down. Our strategy is to appeal for calm in both countries, both through public statements and in other ways.

A few public statements proved to be virtually the only strategy that Washington would muster in the weeks ahead.

Lieutenant General Wesley Clark, who later commanded the NATO air war in Kosovo, was the director of strategic plans and policy for the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon. On learning of the crash, Clark remembers, staff officers asked, "Is it Hutu and Tutsi or Tutsi and Hutu?" He

frantically called for insight into the ethnic dimension of events in Rwanda. Unfortunately, Rwanda had never been of more than marginal concern to Washington's most influential planners.

America's best-informed Rwanda observer was not a government official but a private citizen, Alison Des Forges, a historian and a board member of Human Rights Watch, who lived in Buffalo, New York. Des Forges had been visiting Rwanda since 1963. She had received a Ph.D. from Yale in African history, specializing in Rwanda, and she could speak the Rwandan language, Kinyarwanda. Half an hour after the plane crash Des Forges got a phone call from a close friend in Kigali, the human-rights activist Monique Mujawamariya. Des Forges had been worried about Mujawamariya for weeks, because the Hutu extremist radio station, Radio Mille Collines, had branded her "a bad patriot who deserves to die." Mujawamariya had sent Human Rights Watch a chilling warning a week earlier: "For the last two weeks, all of Kigali has lived under the threat of an instantaneous, carefully prepared operation to eliminate all those who give trouble to President Habyarimana."

Now Habyarimana was dead, and Mujawamariya knew

bassy, lived next door to Uwilingiyimana. She spent the early hours of the morning behind the steel-barred gates of her embassy-owned house as Hutu killers hunted and dispatched their first victims. Leader's phone rang. Uwilingiyimana was on the other end. "Please hide me," she begged.

Minutes after the phone call a UN peacekeeper attempted to hike the Prime Minister over the wall separating their compounds. When Leader heard shots fired, she urged the peacekeeper to abandon the effort. "They can see you!" she shouted. Uwilingiyimana managed to slip with her husband and children into another compound, which was occupied by the UN Development Program. But the militiamen hunted them down in the yard, where the couple surrendered. There were more shots. Leader recalls, "We heard her screaming and then, suddenly, after the gunfire the screaming stopped, and we heard people cheering." Hutu gunmen in the Presidential Guard that day systematically tracked down and eliminated Rwanda's moderate leadership.

The raid on Uwilingiyimana's compound not only cost Rwanda a prominent supporter of the Arusha Accords; it also triggered the collapse of Dallaire's mission. In keeping

Just when did Washington know of the sinister Hutu designs on Rwanda's Tutsi? The testimony of U.S. officials who worked the issue day to day and the declassified documents indicate that plenty was known about the killers' intentions.

instantly that the hard-line Hutu would use the crash as a pretext to begin mass killing. "This is it," she told Des Forges on the phone. For the next twenty-four hours Des Forges called her friend's home every half hour. With each conversation Des Forges could hear the gunfire grow louder as the militia drew closer. Finally the gunmen entered Mujawamariya's home. "I don't want you to hear this," Mujawamariya said softly. "Take care of my children." She hung up the phone.

Mujawamariya's instincts were correct. Within hours of the plane crash Hutu militiamen took command of the streets of Kigali. Dallaire quickly grasped that supporters of the Arusha peace process were being targeted. His phone at UNAMIR headquarters rang constantly as Rwandans around the capital pleaded for help. Dallaire was especially concerned about Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana, a reformer who with the President's death had become the titular head of state. Just after dawn on April 7 five Ghanaian and ten Belgian peacekeepers arrived at the Prime Minister's home in order to deliver her to Radio Rwanda, so that she could broadcast an emergency appeal for calm.

Joyce Leader, the second-in-command at the U.S. em-

with the plan to target the Belgians which the informant Jean-Pierre had relayed to UNAMIR in January, Hutu soldiers rounded up the peacekeepers at Uwilingiyimana's home, took them to a military camp, led the Ghanaians to safety, and then killed and savagely mutilated the ten Belgians. In Belgium the cry for either expanding UNAMIR's mandate or immediately withdrawing was prompt and loud.

In response to the initial killings by the Hutu government, Tutsi rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front—stationed in Kigali under the terms of the Arusha Accords—surged out of their barracks and resumed their civil war against the Hutu regime. But under the cover of that war were early and strong indications that systematic genocide was taking place. From April 7 onward the Hutu-controlled army, the gendarmerie, and the militias worked together to wipe out Rwanda's Tutsi. Many of the early Tutsi victims found themselves specifically, not spontaneously, pursued: lists of targets had been prepared in advance, and Radio Mille Collines broadcast names, addresses, and even license-plate numbers. Killers often carried a machete in one hand and a transistor radio in the other. Tens of thousands of Tutsi fled their homes in panic and were snared and butchered at checkpoints. Little care was given to their disposal. Some

were shoveled into landfills. Human flesh rotted in the sunshine. In churches bodies mingled with scattered hosts. If the killers had taken the time to tend to sanitation, it would have slowed their "sanitization" campaign.

IV. THE "LAST WAR"

The two tracks of events in Rwanda—simultaneous war and genocide—confused policymakers who had scant prior understanding of the country. Atrocities are often carried out in places that are not commonly visited, where outside expertise is limited. When country-specific knowledge is lacking, foreign governments become all the more likely to employ faulty analogies and to "fight the last war." The analogy employed by many of those who confronted the outbreak of killing in Rwanda was a peacekeeping intervention that had gone horribly wrong in Somalia.

On October 3, 1993, ten months after President Bush had sent U.S. troops to Somalia as part of what had seemed a low-risk humanitarian mission, U.S. Army Rangers and Delta special forces in Somalia attempted to seize several top advisers to the warlord Mohammed Farah Aideed. Aideed's faction had ambushed and killed two dozen Pakistani peacekeepers, and the United States was striking back. But in the firefight that ensued the Somali militia killed eighteen Americans, wounded seventy-three, and captured one Black Hawk helicopter pilot. Somali television broadcast both a video interview with the trembling, disoriented pilot and a gory procession in which the corpse of a U.S. Ranger was dragged through a Mogadishu street.

On receiving word of these events, President Clinton cut short a trip to California and convened an urgent crisis-management meeting at the White House. When an aide began recapping the situation, an angry President interrupted him. "Cut the bullshit," Clinton snapped. "Let's work this out." "Work it out" meant walk out. Republican Congressional pressure was intense. Clinton appeared on American television the next day, called off the manhunt for Aideed, temporarily reinforced the troop presence, and announced that all U.S. forces would be home within six months. The Pentagon leadership concluded that peacekeeping in Africa meant trouble and that neither the White House nor Congress would stand by it when the chips were down.

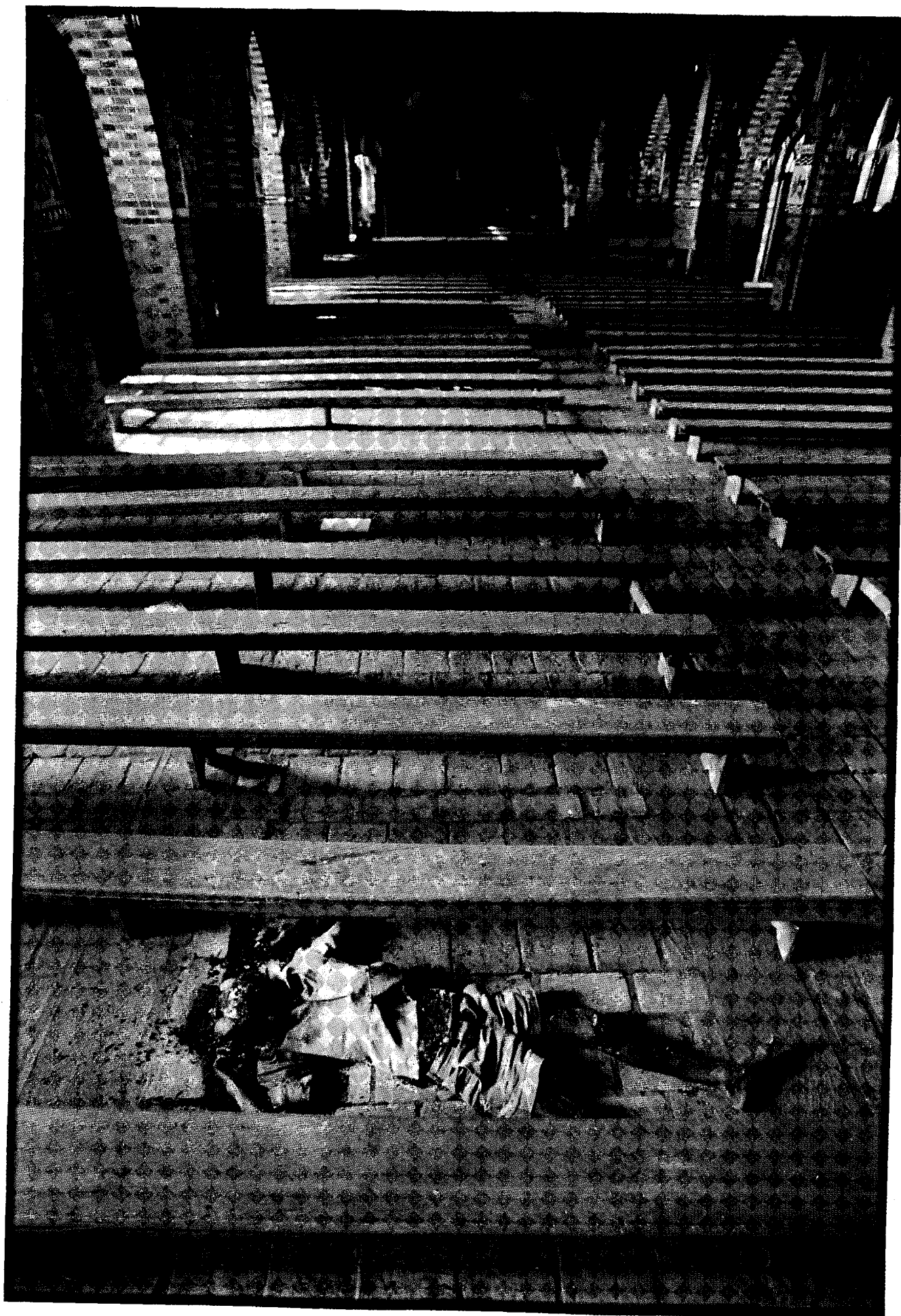
Even before the deadly blowup in Somalia the United States had resisted deploying a UN mission to Rwanda. "Anytime you mentioned peacekeeping in Africa," one U.S. official remembers, "the crucifixes and garlic would come up on every door." Having lost much of its early enthusiasm for peacekeeping and for the United Nations itself, Washington was nervous that the Rwanda mission would sour like so many others. But President Habyarimana had traveled to Washington in 1993 to offer assurances that his government was committed to carrying out the terms of

the Arusha Accords. In the end, after strenuous lobbying by France (Rwanda's chief diplomatic and military patron), U.S. officials accepted the proposition that UNAMIR could be the rare "UN winner." On October 5, 1993, two days after the Somalia firefight, the United States reluctantly voted in the Security Council to authorize Dallaire's mission. Even so, U.S. officials made it clear that Washington would give no consideration to sending U.S. troops to Rwanda. Somalia and another recent embarrassment in Haiti indicated that multilateral initiatives for humanitarian purposes would likely bring the United States all loss and no gain.

Against this backdrop, and under the leadership of Anthony Lake, the national-security adviser, the Clinton Administration accelerated the development of a formal U.S. peacekeeping doctrine. The job was given to Richard Clarke, of the National Security Council, a special assistant to the President who was known as one of the most effective bureaucrats in Washington. In an interagency process that lasted more than a year, Clarke managed the production of a presidential decision directive, PDD-25, which listed sixteen factors that policymakers needed to consider when deciding whether to support peacekeeping activities: seven factors if the United States was to vote in the UN Security Council on peace operations carried out by non-American soldiers, six additional and more stringent factors if U.S. forces were to participate in UN peacekeeping missions, and three final factors if U.S. troops were likely to engage in actual combat. In the words of Representative David Obey, of Wisconsin, the restrictive checklist tried to satisfy the American desire for "zero degree of involvement, and zero degree of risk, and zero degree of pain and confusion." The architects of the doctrine remain its strongest defenders. "Many say PDD-25 was some evil thing designed to kill peacekeeping, when in fact it was there to save peacekeeping," Clarke says. "Peacekeeping was almost dead. There was no support for it in the U.S. government, and the peacekeepers were not effective in the field." Although the directive was not publicly released until May 3, 1994, a month into the genocide, the considerations encapsulated in the doctrine and the Administration's frustration with peacekeeping greatly influenced the thinking of U.S. officials involved in shaping Rwanda policy.

V. THE PEACE PROCESSORS

Each of the American actors dealing with Rwanda brought particular institutional interests and biases to his or her handling of the crisis. Secretary of State Warren Christopher knew little about Africa. At one meeting with his top advisers, several weeks after the plane crash, he pulled an atlas off his shelf to help him locate the country. Belgian Foreign Minister Willie Claes recalls trying to discuss Rwanda with his American counterpart and being



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told, "I have other responsibilities." Officials in the State Department's Africa Bureau were, of course, better informed. Prudence Bushnell, the deputy assistant secretary, was one of them. The daughter of a diplomat, Bushnell had joined the foreign service in 1981, at the age of thirty-five. With her agile mind and sharp tongue, she had earned the attention of George Moose when she served under him at the U.S. embassy in Senegal. When Moose was named the assistant secretary of state for African affairs, in 1993, he made Bushnell his deputy. Just two weeks before the plane crash the State Department had dispatched Bushnell and a colleague to Rwanda in an effort to contain the escalating violence and to spur the stalled peace process.

Unfortunately, for all the concern of the Americans familiar with Rwanda, their diplomacy suffered from three weaknesses. First, ahead of the plane crash diplomats had repeatedly threatened to pull out UN peacekeepers in retaliation for the parties' failure to implement Arusha. These threats were of course counterproductive, because the very Hutu who opposed power-sharing wanted nothing more than a UN withdrawal. One senior U.S. official remembers, "The first response to trouble is 'Let's yank the peacekeepers.' But that is like believing that when children are misbehaving, the proper response is 'Let's send the baby-sitter home.'"

Second, before and during the massacres U.S. diplomacy revealed its natural bias toward states and toward negotiations. Because most official contact occurs between representatives of states, U.S. officials were predisposed to trust the assurances of Rwandan officials, several of whom were plotting genocide behind the scenes. Those in the U.S. government who knew Rwanda best viewed the escalating violence with a diplomatic prejudice that left them both institutionally oriented toward the Rwandan government and reluctant to do anything to disrupt the peace process. An examination of the cable traffic from the U.S. embassy in Kigali to Washington between the signing of the Arusha agreement and the downing of the presidential plane reveals that setbacks were perceived as "dangers to the peace process" more than as "dangers to Rwandans." American criticisms were deliberately and steadfastly leveled at "both sides," though Hutu government and militia forces were usually responsible.

The U.S. ambassador in Kigali, David Rawson, proved especially vulnerable to such bias. Rawson had grown up in Burundi, where his father, an American missionary, had set up a Quaker hospital. He entered the foreign service in 1971. When, in 1993, at age fifty-two, he was given the embassy in Rwanda, his first, he could not have been more intimate with the region, the culture, or the peril. He spoke the local language—almost unprecedented for an ambassador in Central Africa. But Rawson found it difficult to imagine the Rwandans who surrounded the President as conspirators in genocide. He issued pro forma demarches over Habyarimana's obstruction of power-sharing, but the cable

traffic shows that he accepted the President's assurances that he was doing all he could. The U.S. investment in the peace process gave rise to a wishful tendency to see peace "around the corner." Rawson remembers, "We were naive policy optimists, I suppose. The fact that negotiations can't work is almost not one of the options open to people who care about peace. We were looking for the hopeful signs, not the dark signs. In fact, we were looking away from the dark signs ... One of the things I learned and should have already known is that once you launch a process, it takes on its own momentum. I had said, 'Let's try this, and then if it doesn't work, we can back away.' But bureaucracies don't allow that. Once the Washington side buys into a process, it gets pursued, almost blindly." Even after the Hutu government began exterminating Tutsi, U.S. diplomats focused most of their efforts on "re-establishing a cease-fire" and "getting Arusha back on track."

The third problematic feature of U.S. diplomacy before and during the genocide was a tendency toward blindness bred by familiarity: the few people in Washington who were paying attention to Rwanda before Habyarimana's plane was shot down were those who had been tracking Rwanda for some time and had thus come to expect a certain level of ethnic violence from the region. And because the U.S. government had done little when some 40,000 people had been killed in Hutu-Tutsi violence in Burundi in October of 1993, these officials also knew that Washington was prepared to tolerate substantial bloodshed. When the massacres began in April, some U.S. regional specialists initially suspected that Rwanda was undergoing "another flare-up" that would involve another "acceptable" (if tragic) round of ethnic murder.

Rawson had read up on genocide before his posting to Rwanda, surveying what had become a relatively extensive scholarly literature on its causes. But although he expected internecine killing, he did not anticipate the scale at which it occurred. "Nothing in Rwandan culture or history could have led a person to that forecast," he says. "Most of us thought that if a war broke out, it would be quick, that these poor people didn't have the resources, the means, to fight a sophisticated war. I couldn't have known that they would do each other in with the most economic means." George Moose agrees: "We were psychologically and imaginatively too limited."

VI. FOREIGNERS FIRST

David Rawson was sitting with his wife in their residence watching a taped broadcast of *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* when he heard the back-to-back explosions that signaled the destruction of President Habyarimana's plane. As the American ambassador, he was concerned primarily for American citizens, who, he feared, could be killed or injured in any outbreak of fighting. The United States made the decision to withdraw its personnel

and nationals on April 7. Penned into his house, Rawson did not feel that his presence was of any use. Looking back, he says, "Did we have a moral responsibility to stay there? Would it have made a difference? I don't know, but the killings were taking place in broad daylight while we were there. I didn't feel that we were achieving much."

Still, about 300 Rwandans from the neighborhood had gathered at Rawson's residence seeking refuge, and when the Americans cleared out, the local people were left to their fates. Rawson recalls, "I told the people who were there that we were leaving and the flag was coming down, and they would have to make their own choice about what to do ... Nobody really asked us to take them with us." Rawson says he could not help even those who worked closest to him. His chief steward, who served dinner and washed dishes at the house, called the ambassador from his home and pleaded, "We're in terrible danger. Please come and get us." Rawson says, "I had to tell him, 'We can't move. We can't come.'" The steward and his wife were killed.

Assistant Secretary Moose was away from Washington, so Prudence Bushnell, the acting assistant secretary, was made the director of the task force that managed the Rwanda

stopped and searched," Rawson says. "It would have been impossible to get Tutsi through." All told, thirty-five local employees of the embassy were killed in the genocide.

Warren Christopher appeared on the NBC news program *Meet the Press* the morning the evacuation was completed. "In the great tradition, the ambassador was in the last car," Christopher said proudly. "So that evacuation has gone very well." Christopher stressed that although U.S. Marines had been dispatched to Burundi, there were no plans to send them into Rwanda to restore order: they were in the region as a safety net, in case they were needed to assist in the evacuation. "It's always a sad moment when the Americans have to leave," he said, "but it was the prudent thing to do." The Republican Senate minority leader, Bob Dole, a spirited defender of Bosnia's besieged Muslims at the time, agreed. "I don't think we have any national interest there," Dole said on April 10. "The Americans are out, and as far as I'm concerned, in Rwanda, that ought to be the end of it."

Dallaire, too, had been ordered to make the evacuation of foreigners his priority. The UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, which had rejected the field commander's proposed raid on arms caches in January, sent

If the major powers had reconfigured the thousand-man European evacuation force and the U.S. Marines on standby in Burundi, and added them to the peacekeepers in Rwanda, Major General Dallaire would have had the numbers on his side. But they walked away.

evacuation. Her focus, like Rawson's, was on the fate of U.S. citizens. "I felt very strongly that my first obligation was to the Americans," she recalls. "I was sorry about the Rwandans, of course, but my job was to get our folks out ... Then again, people didn't know that it was a genocide. What I was told was 'Look, Pru, these people do this from time to time.' We thought we'd be right back."

At a State Department press conference on April 8 Bushnell made an appearance and spoke gravely about the mounting violence in Rwanda and the status of Americans there. After she left the podium, Michael McCurry, the department spokesman, took her place and criticized foreign governments for preventing the screening of the Steven Spielberg film *Schindler's List*. "This film movingly portrays ... the twentieth century's most horrible catastrophe," he said. "And it shows that even in the midst of genocide, one individual can make a difference." No one made any connection between Bushnell's remarks and McCurry's. Neither journalists nor officials in the United States were focused on the Tutsi.

On April 9 and 10, in five different convoys, Ambassador Rawson and 250 Americans were evacuated from Kigali and other points. "When we left, the cars were

an explicit cable: "You should make every effort not to compromise your impartiality or to act beyond your mandate, but [you] may exercise your discretion to do [so] should this be essential for the evacuation of foreign nationals. This should not, repeat not, extend to participating in possible combat except in self-defense." Neutrality was essential. Avoiding combat was paramount, but Dallaire could make an exception for non-Rwandans.

While the United States evacuated overland without an American military escort, the Europeans sent troops to Rwanda so that their personnel could exit by air. On April 9 Dallaire watched covetously as just over a thousand French, Belgian, and Italian soldiers descended on Kigali Airport to begin evacuating their expatriates. These commandos were clean-shaven, well fed, and heavily armed, in marked contrast to Dallaire's exhausted, hungry, ragtag peacekeeping force. Within three days of the plane crash estimates of the number of dead in the capital already exceeded 10,000.

If the soldiers ferried in for the evacuation had teamed up with UNAMIR, Dallaire would have had a sizable deterrent force. At that point he commanded 440 Belgians, 942 Bangladeshis, 843 Chanaians, 60 Tunisians, and 255 others from twenty countries. He could also call on a reserve of

800 Belgians in Nairobi. If the major powers had reconfigured the thousand-man European evacuation force and the U.S. Marines on standby in Burundi—who numbered 300—and contributed them to his mission, he would finally have had the numbers on his side. “Mass slaughter was happening, and suddenly there in Kigali we had the forces we needed to contain it, and maybe even to stop it,” he recalls. “Yet they picked up their people and turned and walked away.”

The consequences of the exclusive attention to foreigners were felt immediately. In the days after the plane crash some 2,000 Rwandans, including 400 children, had grouped at the Ecole Technique Officielle, under the protection of about ninety Belgian soldiers. Many of them were already suffering from machete wounds. They gathered in the classrooms and on the playing field outside the school. Rwandan government and militia forces lay in wait nearby, drinking beer and chanting, “*Pawa, pawa*,” for “Hutu power.” On April 11 the Belgians were ordered to regroup at the airport to aid the evacuation of European civilians. Knowing they were trapped, several Rwandans pursued the jeeps, shouting, “Do not abandon us!” The UN soldiers shooed them away from their vehicles and fired warning shots over their heads. When the peacekeepers had gone out through one gate, Hutu militiamen entered through another, firing machine guns and throwing grenades. Most of the 2,000 gathered there were killed.

In the three days during which some 4,000 foreigners were evacuated, about 20,000 Rwandans were killed. After the American evacuees were safely out and the U.S. embassy had been closed, Bill and Hillary Clinton visited the people who had manned the emergency-operations room at the State Department and offered congratulations on a “job well done.”

VII. GENOCIDE? WHAT GENOCIDE?

Just when did Washington know of the sinister Hutu designs on Rwanda’s Tutsi? Writing in *Foreign Affairs* last year, Alan Kuperman argued that President Clinton “could not have known that a nationwide genocide was under way” until about two weeks into the killing. It is true that the precise nature and extent of the slaughter was obscured by the civil war, the withdrawal of U.S. diplomatic sources, some confused press reporting, and the lies of the Rwandan government. Nonetheless, both the testimony of U.S. officials who worked the issue day to day and the declassified documents indicate that plenty was known about the killers’ intentions.

A determination of genocide turns not on the numbers killed, which is always difficult to ascertain at a time of crisis, but on the perpetrators’ intent: Were Hutu forces attempting to destroy Rwanda’s Tutsi? The answer to this question was available early on. “By eight A.M. the morning after the plane crash we knew what was happening, that there was

systematic killing of Tutsi,” Joyce Leader recalls. “People were calling me and telling me who was getting killed. I knew they were going door to door.” Back at the State Department she explained to her colleagues that three kinds of killing were going on: war, politically motivated murder, and genocide. Dallaire’s early cables to New York likewise described the armed conflict that had resumed between rebels and government forces, and also stated plainly that savage “ethnic cleansing” of Tutsi was occurring. U.S. analysts warned that mass killings would increase. In an April 11 memo prepared for Frank Wisner, the undersecretary of defense for policy, in advance of a dinner with Henry Kissinger, a key talking point was “Unless both sides can be convinced to return to the peace process, a massive (hundreds of thousands of deaths) bloodbath will ensue.”

Whatever the inevitable imperfections of U.S. intelligence early on, the reports from Rwanda were severe enough to distinguish Hutu killers from ordinary combatants in civil war. And they certainly warranted directing additional U.S. intelligence assets toward the region—to snap satellite photos of large gatherings of Rwandan civilians or of mass graves, to intercept military communications, or to infiltrate the country in person. Though there is no evidence that senior policymakers deployed such assets, routine intelligence continued to pour in. On April 26 an unattributed intelligence memo titled “Responsibility for Massacres in Rwanda” reported that the ringleaders of the genocide, Colonel Théoneste Bagosora and his crisis committee, were determined to liquidate their opposition and exterminate the Tutsi populace. A May 9 Defense Intelligence Agency report stated plainly that the Rwandan violence was not spontaneous but was directed by the government, with lists of victims prepared well in advance. The DIA observed that an “organized parallel effort of *genocide* [was] being implemented by the army to destroy the leadership of the Tutsi community.”

From April 8 onward media coverage featured eyewitness accounts describing the widespread targeting of Tutsi and the corpses piling up on Kigali’s streets. American reporters relayed stories of missionaries and embassy officials who had been unable to save their Rwandan friends and neighbors from death. On April 9 a front-page *Washington Post* story quoted reports that the Rwandan employees of the major international relief agencies had been executed “in front of horrified expatriate staffers.” On April 10 a *New York Times* front-page article quoted the Red Cross claim that “tens of thousands” were dead, 8,000 in Kigali alone, and that corpses were “in the houses, in the streets, everywhere.” The *Post* the same day led its front-page story with a description of “a pile of corpses six feet high” outside the main hospital. On April 14 *The New York Times* reported the shooting and hacking to death of nearly 1,200 men, women, and children in the church where they had sought



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refuge. On April 19 Human Rights Watch, which had excellent sources on the ground in Rwanda, estimated the number of dead at 100,000 and called for use of the term “genocide.” The 100,000 figure (which proved to be a gross underestimate) was picked up immediately by the Western media, endorsed by the Red Cross, and featured on the front page of *The Washington Post*. On April 24 the *Post* reported how “the heads and limbs of victims were sorted and piled neatly, a bone-chilling order in the midst of chaos that harked back to the Holocaust.” President Clinton certainly could have known that a genocide was under way, if he had wanted to know.

Even after the reality of genocide in Rwanda had become irrefutable, when bodies were shown choking the Kagera River on the nightly news, the brute fact of the slaughter failed to influence U.S. policy except in a negative way. American officials, for a variety of reasons, shunned the use of what became known as “the g-word.” They felt that using it would have obliged the United States to act, under the terms of the 1948 Genocide Convention. They also believed, understandably, that it would harm U.S. credibility to name the crime and then do nothing to stop it. A discussion paper on Rwanda, prepared by an official in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and dated May 1, testifies to the nature of official thinking. Regarding issues that might be brought up at the next interagency working group, it stated,

1. **Genocide Investigation:** Language that calls for an international investigation of human rights abuses and possible violations of the genocide convention. *Be Careful. Legal at State was worried about this yesterday—Genocide finding could commit [the U.S. government] to actually “do something.”* [Emphasis added.]

At an interagency teleconference in late April, Susan Rice, a rising star on the NSC who worked under Richard Clarke, stunned a few of the officials present when she asked, “If we use the word ‘genocide’ and are seen as doing nothing, what will be the effect on the November [congressional] election?” Lieutenant Colonel Tony Marley remembers the incredulity of his colleagues at the State Department. “We could believe that people would wonder that,” he says, “but not that they would actually voice it.” Rice does not recall the incident but concedes, “If I said it, it was completely inappropriate, as well as irrelevant.”

The genocide debate in U.S. government circles began the last week of April, but it was not until May 21, six weeks after the killing began, that Secretary Christopher gave his diplomats permission to use the term “genocide”—sort of. The UN Human Rights Commission was about to meet in special session, and the U.S. representative, Geraldine Ferraro, needed guidance on whether to join a resolution stating that genocide had occurred. The stubborn U.S. stand had become untenable internationally.

The case for a label of genocide was straightforward,

according to a May 18 confidential analysis prepared by the State Department’s assistant secretary for intelligence and research, Toby Gati: lists of Tutsi victims’ names and addresses had reportedly been prepared; Rwandan government troops and Hutu militia and youth squads were the main perpetrators; massacres were reported all over the country; humanitarian agencies were now “claiming from 200,000 to 500,000 lives” lost. Gati offered the intelligence bureau’s view: “We believe 500,000 may be an exaggerated estimate, but no accurate figures are available. Systematic killings began within hours of Habyarimana’s death. Most of those killed have been Tutsi civilians, including women and children.” The terms of the Genocide Convention had been met. “We weren’t quibbling about these numbers,” Gati says. “We can never know precise figures, but our analysts had been reporting huge numbers of deaths for weeks. We were basically saying, ‘A rose by any other name ...’”

Despite this straightforward assessment, Christopher remained reluctant to speak the obvious truth. When he issued his guidance, on May 21, fully a month after Human Rights Watch had put a name to the tragedy, Christopher’s instructions were hopelessly muddled.

The delegation is authorized to agree to a resolution that states that “acts of genocide” have occurred in Rwanda or that “genocide has occurred in Rwanda.” Other formulations that suggest that some, but not all of the killings in Rwanda are genocide ... e.g. “genocide is taking place in Rwanda”—are authorized. Delegation is not authorized to agree to the characterization of any specific incident as genocide or to agree to any formulation that indicates that all killings in Rwanda are genocide.

Notably, Christopher confined permission to acknowledge full-fledged genocide to the upcoming session of the Human Rights Commission. Outside that venue State Department officials were authorized to state publicly only that *acts* of genocide had occurred.

Christine Shelly, a State Department spokesperson, had long been charged with publicly articulating the U.S. position on whether events in Rwanda counted as genocide. For two months she had avoided the term, and as her June 10 exchange with the Reuters correspondent Alan Elsner reveals, her semantic dance continued.

Elsner: How would you describe the events taking place in Rwanda?

Shelly: Based on the evidence we have seen from observations on the ground, we have every reason to believe that acts of genocide have occurred in Rwanda.

Elsner: What’s the difference between “acts of genocide” and “genocide”?

Shelly: Well, I think the—as you know, there’s a legal definition of this ... clearly not all of the killings that have taken place in Rwanda are killings to which you might apply that label ... But as to the distinctions between the words, we’re trying to call what we have seen so far as

best as we can; and based, again, on the evidence, we have every reason to believe that acts of genocide have occurred.

Elsner: How many acts of genocide does it take to make genocide?

Shelly: Alan, that's just not a question that I'm in a position to answer.

The same day, in Istanbul, Warren Christopher, by then under severe internal and external pressure, relented: "If there is any particular magic in calling it genocide, I have no hesitancy in saying that."

VIII. "NOT EVEN A SIDESHOW"

Once the Americans had been evacuated, Rwanda largely dropped off the radar of most senior Clinton Administration officials. In the situation room on the seventh floor of the State Department a map of Rwanda had been hurriedly pinned to the wall in the aftermath of the plane crash, and eight banks of phones had rung off the hook. Now, with U.S. citizens safely home, the State Department chaired a daily interagency meeting, often by teleconference, designed to coordinate mid-level diplomatic and humanitarian responses. Cabinet-level officials focused on crises elsewhere. Anthony Lake recalls, "I was obsessed with Haiti and Bosnia during that period, so Rwanda was, in William Shawcross's words, a 'sideshow,' but not even a sideshow—a no-show." At the NSC the person who managed Rwanda policy was not Lake, the national-security adviser, who happened to know Africa, but Richard Clarke, who oversaw peacekeeping policy, and for whom the news from Rwanda only confirmed a deep skepticism about the viability of UN deployments. Clarke believed that another UN failure could doom relations between Congress and the United Nations. He also sought to shield the President from congressional and public criticism. Donald Steinberg managed the Africa portfolio at the NSC and tried to look out for the dying Rwandans, but he was not an experienced infighter and, colleagues say, he "never won a single argument" with Clarke.

The Americans who wanted the United States to do the most were those who knew Rwanda best. Joyce Leader, Rawson's deputy in Rwanda, had been the one to close and lock the doors to the U.S. embassy. When she returned to Washington, she was given a small room in a back office and told to prepare the State Department's daily Rwanda summaries, drawing on press and U.S. intelligence reports. Incredibly, despite her expertise and her contacts in Rwanda, she was rarely consulted and was instructed not to deal directly with her sources in Kigali. Once, an NSC staffer did call to ask, "Short of sending in the troops, what is to be done?" Leader's response, unwelcome, was "Send in the troops." Throughout the U.S. government Africa specialists had the least clout of all regional specialists and the smallest chance of effecting policy outcomes. In contrast, those

with the most pull in the bureaucracy had never visited Rwanda or met any Rwandans. They spoke analytically of "national interests" or even "humanitarian consequences" without appearing gripped by the unfolding human tragedy. The dearth of country or regional expertise in the senior circles of government not only reduces the capacity of officers to assess the "news." It also increases the likelihood—a dynamic identified by Lake in his 1971 *Foreign Policy* article—that killings will become abstractions. "Ethnic bloodshed" in Africa was thought to be regrettable but not particularly unusual.

As it happened, when the crisis began, President Clinton himself had a coincidental and personal connection with the country. At a coffee at the White House in December of 1993 Clinton had met Monique Mujawamariya, the Rwandan human-rights activist. He had been struck by the courage of a woman who still bore facial scars from an automobile accident that had been arranged to curb her activities. Clinton had singled her out, saying, "Your courage is an inspiration to all of us." On April 8, two days after the onset of the killing, *The Washington Post* published a letter that Alison Des Forges had sent to Human Rights Watch after Mujawamariya had hung up the phone to face her fate. "I believe Monique was killed at 6:30 this morning," Des Forges had written. "I have virtually no hope that she is still alive, but will continue to try for more information. In the meantime ... please inform everyone who will care." Word of Mujawamariya's disappearance got the President's attention, and he inquired about her whereabouts repeatedly. "I can't tell you how much time we spent trying to find Monique," one U.S. official remembers. "Sometimes it felt as though she was the only Rwandan in danger." Miraculously, Mujawamariya had not been killed—she had hidden in the rafters of her home after hanging up with Des Forges, and eventually managed to talk and bribe her way to safety. She was evacuated to Belgium, and on April 18 she joined Des Forges in the United States, where the pair began lobbying the Clinton Administration on behalf of those left behind. With Mujawamariya's rescue, reported in detail in the *Post* and *The New York Times*, the President apparently lost his personal interest in events in Rwanda.

During the entire three months of the genocide Clinton never assembled his top policy advisers to discuss the killings. Anthony Lake likewise never gathered the "principals"—the Cabinet-level members of the foreign-policy team. Rwanda was never thought to warrant its own top-level meeting. When the subject came up, it did so along with, and subordinate to, discussions of Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia. Whereas these crises involved U.S. personnel and stirred some public interest, Rwanda generated no sense of urgency and could safely be avoided by Clinton at no political cost. The editorial boards of the major American newspapers discouraged U.S. intervention during the genocide. They, like the Administration, lamented the

killings but believed, in the words of an April 17 *Washington Post* editorial, “The United States has no recognizable national interest in taking a role, certainly not a leading role.” Capitol Hill was quiet. Some in Congress were glad to be free of the expense of another flawed UN mission. Others, including a few members of the Africa subcommittees and the Congressional Black Caucus, eventually appealed tamerly for the United States to play a role in ending the violence—but again, they did not dare urge U.S. involvement on the ground, and they did not kick up a public fuss. Members of Congress weren’t hearing from their constituents. Pat Schroeder, of Colorado, said on April 30, “There are some groups terribly concerned about the gorillas ... But—it sounds terrible—people just don’t know what can be done about the people.” Randall Robinson, of the nongovernmental organization TransAfrica, was preoccupied, staging a hunger strike to protest the U.S. repatriation of Haitian refugees. Human Rights Watch supplied exemplary intelligence and established important one-on-one contacts in the Administration, but the organization lacks a grassroots base from which to mobilize a broader segment of American society.

IX. THE UN WITHDRAWAL

When the killing began, Romeo Dallaire expected and appealed for reinforcements. Within hours of the plane crash he had cabled UN headquarters in New York: “Give me the means and I can do more.” He was sending peacekeepers on rescue missions around the city, and he felt it was essential to increase the size and improve the quality of the UN’s presence. But the United States opposed the idea of sending reinforcements, no matter where they were from. The fear, articulated mainly at the Pentagon but felt throughout the bureaucracy, was that what would start as a small engagement by foreign troops would end as a large and costly one by Americans. This was the lesson of Somalia, where U.S. troops had gotten into trouble in an effort to bail out the beleaguered Pakistanis. The logical outgrowth of this fear was an effort to steer clear of Rwanda entirely and be sure others did the same. Only by yanking Dallaire’s entire peacekeeping force could the United States protect itself from involvement down the road.

One senior U.S. official remembers, “When the reports of the deaths of the ten Belgians came in, it was clear that it was Somalia redux, and the sense was that there would be an expectation everywhere that the U.S. would get involved. We thought leaving the peacekeepers in Rwanda and having them confront the violence would take us where we’d been before. It was a foregone conclusion that the United States wouldn’t intervene and that the concept of UN peacekeeping could not be sacrificed again.”

A foregone conclusion. What is most remarkable about the American response to the Rwandan genocide is not so much

the absence of U.S. military action as that during the entire genocide the possibility of U.S. military intervention was never even debated. Indeed, the United States resisted intervention of any kind.

The bodies of the slain Belgian soldiers were returned to Brussels on April 14. One of the pivotal conversations in the course of the genocide took place around that time, when Willie Claes, the Belgian Foreign Minister, called the State Department to request “cover.” “We are pulling out, but we don’t want to be seen to be doing it alone,” Claes said, asking the Americans to support a full UN withdrawal. Dallaire had not anticipated that Belgium would extract its soldiers, removing the backbone of his mission and stranding Rwandans in their hour of greatest need. “I expected the ex-colonial white countries would stick it out even if they took casualties,” he remembers. “I thought their pride would have led them to stay to try to sort the place out. The Belgian decision caught me totally off guard. I was truly stunned.”

Belgium did not want to leave ignominiously, by itself. Warren Christopher agreed to back Belgian requests for a full UN exit. Policy over the next month or so can be described simply: no U.S. military intervention, robust demands for a withdrawal of all of Dallaire’s forces, and no support for a new UN mission that would challenge the killers. Belgium had the cover it needed.

On April 15 Christopher sent one of the most forceful documents to be produced in the entire three months of the genocide to Madeleine Albright at the UN—a cable instructing her to demand a full UN withdrawal. The cable, which was heavily influenced by Richard Clarke at the NSC, and which bypassed Donald Steinberg and was never seen by Anthony Lake, was unequivocal about the next steps. Saying that he had “fully” taken into account the “humanitarian reasons put forth for retention of UNAMIR elements in Rwanda,” Christopher wrote that there was “insufficient justification” to retain a UN presence.

The international community must give highest priority to full, orderly withdrawal of all UNAMIR personnel as soon as possible ... We will oppose any effort at this time to preserve a UNAMIR presence in Rwanda ... Our opposition to retaining a UNAMIR presence in Rwanda is firm. It is based on our conviction that the Security Council has an obligation to ensure that peacekeeping operations are viable, that they are capable of fulfilling their mandates, and that UN peacekeeping personnel are not placed or retained, knowingly, in an untenable situation.

“Once we knew the Belgians were leaving, we were left with a rump mission incapable of doing anything to help people,” Clarke remembers. “They were doing nothing to stop the killings.”

But Clarke underestimated the deterrent effect that Dallaire’s very few peacekeepers were having. Although some soldiers hunkered down, terrified, others scoured

Kigali, rescuing Tutsi, and later established defensive positions in the city, opening their doors to the fortunate Tutsi who made it through roadblocks to reach them. One Senegalese captain saved a hundred or so lives single-handedly. Some 25,000 Rwandans eventually assembled at positions manned by UNAMIR personnel. The Hutu were generally reluctant to massacre large groups of Tutsi if foreigners (armed or unarmed) were present. It did not take many UN soldiers to dissuade the Hutu from attacking. At the Hotel des Mille Collines ten peacekeepers and four UN military observers helped to protect the several hundred civilians sheltered there for the duration of the crisis. About 10,000 Rwandans gathered at the Amohoro Stadium under light UN cover. Brent Beardsley, Dallaire's executive assistant, remembers, "If there was any determined resistance at close quarters, the government guys tended to back off." Kevin Aiston, the Rwanda desk officer at the State Department, was keeping track of Rwandan civilians under UN protection. When Prudence Bushnell told him of the U.S. decision to demand a UNAMIR withdrawal, he turned pale. "We can't," he said. Bushnell replied, "The train has already left the station."

down to 270." In other words, the memorandum suggested that the United States was *leading* efforts to ensure that the Rwandans under UN protection were not abandoned. The opposite was true.

Most of Dallaire's troops were evacuated by April 25. Though he was supposed to reduce the size of his force to 270, he ended up keeping 503 peacekeepers. By this time Dallaire was trying to deal with a bloody frenzy. "My force was standing knee-deep in mutilated bodies, surrounded by the guttural moans of dying people, looking into the eyes of children bleeding to death with their wounds burning in the sun and being invaded by maggots and flies," he later wrote. "I found myself walking through villages where the only sign of life was a goat, or a chicken, or a songbird, as all the people were dead, their bodies being eaten by voracious packs of wild dogs."

Dallaire had to work within narrow limits. He attempted simply to keep the positions he held and to protect the 25,000 Rwandans under UN supervision while hoping that the member states on the Security Council would change their minds and send him some help while it still mattered.

By coincidence Rwanda held one of the rotating seats

American officials, for a variety of reasons, shunned the use of what became known as "the g-word." Many of them felt that using it would have obliged the United States to act, under the terms of the Genocide Convention.

On April 19 the Belgian Colonel Luc Marchal delivered his final salute and departed with the last of his soldiers. The Belgian withdrawal reduced Dallaire's troop strength to 2,100. More crucially, he lost his best troops. Command and control among Dallaire's remaining forces became tenuous. Dallaire soon lost every line of communication to the countryside. He had only a single satellite phone link to the outside world.

The UN Security Council now made a decision that sealed the Tutsi's fate and signaled the militia that it would have free rein. The U.S. demand for a full UN withdrawal had been opposed by some African nations, and even by Madeleine Albright; so the United States lobbied instead for a dramatic drawdown in troop strength. On April 21, amid press reports of some 100,000 dead in Rwanda, the Security Council voted to slash UNAMIR's forces to 270 men. Albright went along, publicly declaring that a "small, skeletal" operation would be left in Kigali to "show the will of the international community."

After the UN vote Clarke sent a memorandum to Lake reporting that language about "the safety and security of Rwandans under UN protection had been inserted by US/UN at the end of the day to prevent an otherwise unanimous UNSC from walking away from the at-risk Rwandans under UN protection as the peacekeepers drew

on the Security Council at the time of the genocide. Neither the United States nor any other UN member state ever suggested that the representative of the genocidal government be expelled from the council. Nor did any Security Council country offer to provide safe haven to Rwandan refugees who escaped the carnage. In one instance Dallaire's forces succeeded in evacuating a group of Rwandans by plane to Kenya. The Nairobi authorities allowed the plane to land, sequestered it in a hangar, and, echoing the American decision to turn back the *S.S. St. Louis* during the Holocaust, then forced the plane to return to Rwanda. The fate of the passengers is unknown.

Throughout this period the Clinton Administration was largely silent. The closest it came to a public denunciation of the Rwandan government occurred after personal lobbying by Human Rights Watch, when Anthony Lake issued a statement calling on Rwandan military leaders by name to "do everything in their power to end the violence immediately." When I spoke with Lake six years later, and informed him that human-rights groups and U.S. officials point to this statement as the sum total of official public attempts to shame the Rwandan government in this period, he seemed stunned. "You're kidding," he said. "That's truly pathetic."

At the State Department the diplomacy was conducted



privately, by telephone. Prudence Bushnell regularly set her alarm for 2:00 A.M. and phoned Rwandan government officials. She spoke several times with Augustin Bizimungu, the Rwandan military chief of staff. "These were the most bizarre phone calls," she says. "He spoke in perfectly charming French. 'Oh, it's so nice to hear from you,' he said. I told him, 'I am calling to tell you President Clinton is going to hold you accountable for the killings.' He said, 'Oh, how nice it is that your President is thinking of me.'"

X. THE PENTAGON "CHOP"

The daily meeting of the Rwanda interagency working group was attended, either in person or by teleconference, by representatives from the various State Department bureaus, the Pentagon, the National Security Council, and the intelligence community. Any

proposal that originated in the working group had to survive the Pentagon "chop." "Hard intervention," meaning U.S. military action, was obviously out of the question. But Pentagon officials routinely stymied initiatives for "soft intervention" as well.

The Pentagon discussion paper on Rwanda, referred to earlier, ran down a list of the working group's six short-term policy objectives and carped at most of them. The fear of a slippery slope was persuasive. Next to the seemingly innocuous suggestion that the United States "support the UN and others in attempts to achieve a cease-fire" the Pentagon official responded, "Need to change 'attempts' to 'political efforts'—without 'political' there is a danger of signing up to troop contributions."

The one policy move the Defense Department supported was a U.S. effort to achieve an arms embargo. But the same



discussing the matter and he argued the ineffectiveness of this step: "We do not envision it will have a significant impact on the killings because machetes, knives and other hand implements have been the most common weapons."

Dallaire never spoke to Bushnell or to Tony Marley, the U.S. military liaison to the Arusha process, during the genocide, but they all reached the same conclusions. Seeing that no troops were forthcoming, they turned their attention to measures short of full-scale deployment which might alleviate the suffering. Dallaire pleaded with New York, and Bushnell and her team recommended in Washington, that something be done to "neutralize" Radio Mille Collines.

The country best equipped to prevent the genocide planners from broadcasting murderous instructions directly to the population was the United States. Marley offered

three possibilities. The United States could destroy the antenna. It could transmit "counter-broadcasts" urging perpetrators to stop the genocide. Or it could jam the hate radio station's broadcasts. This could have been done from an airborne platform such as the Air Force's Commando Solo airplane. Anthony Lake raised the matter with Secretary of Defense William Perry at the end of April. Pentagon officials considered all the proposals non-starters. On May 5 Frank Wisner, the undersecretary of defense for policy, prepared a memo for Sandy Berger, then the deputy national-security adviser. Wisner's memo testifies to the unwillingness of the U.S. government to make even financial sacrifices to diminish the killing.

We have looked at options to stop the broadcasts within the Pentagon, discussed them interagency and concluded jamming is an ineffective and expensive mechanism that will not accomplish the objective the NSC Advisor seeks.

International legal conventions complicate airborne or ground based jamming and the mountainous terrain reduces the effectiveness of either option. Commando Solo, an Air National Guard asset, is the only suitable DOD jamming platform. It costs approximately \$8500 per flight hour and requires a semi-secure area of operations due to its vulnerability and limited self-protection.

I believe it would be wiser to use air to assist in Rwanda in the [food] relief effort ...

The plane would have needed to remain in Rwandan airspace while it waited for radio transmissions to begin. "First we would have had to figure out whether it made sense to use Commando Solo," Wisner recalls. "Then we had to get it from where it was already and be sure it could be moved. Then we would have needed flight clearance from all the countries nearby. And then we would need the political go-ahead. By the time we got all this, weeks would have passed. And it was not going to solve the fundamental problem, which was one that needed to be addressed militarily." Pentagon planners understood that stopping the genocide required a military solution. Neither they nor the White House wanted any part in a military solution. Yet instead of undertaking other forms of intervention that might have at least saved some lives, they justified inaction by arguing that a military solution was required.

Whatever the limitations of radio jamming, which clearly would have been no panacea, most of the delays Wisner cites could have been avoided if senior Administration officials had followed through. But Rwanda was not their problem. Instead justifications for standing by abounded. In early May the State Department Legal Advisor's Office issued a finding against radio jamming, citing international broadcasting agreements and the American commitment to free speech. When Bushnell raised radio jamming yet again at a meeting, one Pentagon official chided her for naiveté: "Pru, radios don't kill people. *People* kill people!"

The Defense Department was disdainful both of the

policy ideas being circulated at the working-group meetings and, memos indicate, of the people circulating them. A memo by one Defense Department aide observed that the State Department's Africa bureau had received a phone call from a Kigali hotel owner who said that his hotel and the civilians inside were about to be attacked. The memo snidely reported that the Africa bureau's proposed "solution" was "Pru Bushnell will call the [Rwandan] military and tell them we will hold them personally responsible if anything happens (!)." (In fact the hotel owner, who survived the genocide, later acknowledged that phone calls from Washington played a key role in dissuading the killers from massacring the inhabitants of the hotel.)

However significant and obstructionist the role of the Pentagon in April and May, Defense Department officials were stepping into a vacuum. As one U.S. official put it, "Look, nobody senior was paying any attention to this mess. And in the absence of any political leadership from the top, when you have one group that feels pretty strongly about what *shouldn't* be done, it is extremely likely they are going to end up shaping U.S. policy." Lieu-

XI. PDD-25 IN ACTION

No sooner had most of Dallaire's forces been withdrawn, in late April, than a handful of nonpermanent members of the Security Council, aghast at the scale of the slaughter, pressed the major powers to send a new, beefed-up force (UNAMIR II) to Rwanda.

When Dallaire's troops had first arrived, in the fall of 1993, they had done so under a fairly traditional peacekeeping mandate known as a Chapter VI deployment—a mission that assumes a cease-fire and a desire on both sides to comply with a peace accord. The Security Council now had to decide whether it was prepared to move from peacekeeping to peace *enforcement*—that is, to a Chapter VII mission in a hostile environment. This would demand more peacekeepers with far greater resources, more-aggressive rules of engagement, and an explicit recognition that the UN soldiers were there to protect civilians.

Two proposals emerged. Dallaire submitted a plan that called for joining his remaining peacekeepers with about 5,000 well-armed soldiers he hoped could be gathered quickly by the Security Council. He wanted to secure Kigali and then fan outward to create safe havens for Rwan-

The United States was best equipped to prevent the genocide planners from broadcasting murderous instructions by radio. When Bushnell raised the issue of radio jamming, a Pentagon official chided her for naiveté: "Pru, radios don't kill people. People kill people!"

tenant General Wesley Clark looked to the White House for leadership. "The Pentagon is always going to be the last to want to intervene," he says. "It is up to the civilians to tell us they want to do something and we'll figure out how to do it."

But with no powerful personalities or high-ranking officials arguing forcefully for meaningful action, mid-level Pentagon officials held sway, vetoing or stalling on hesitant proposals put forward by mid-level State Department or NSC officials. If Pentagon objections were to be overcome, the President, Secretary Christopher, Secretary Perry, or Anthony Lake would have to step forward to "own" the problem, which did not happen.

The deck was stacked against Rwandans who were hiding wherever they could and praying for rescue. The American public expressed no interest in Rwanda, and the crisis was treated as a civil war requiring a cease-fire or as a "peacekeeping problem" requiring a UN withdrawal. It was not treated as a genocide demanding instant action. The top policymakers trusted that their subordinates were doing all they could do, while the subordinates worked with an extremely narrow understanding of what the United States *would* do.

dans who had gathered in large numbers at churches and schools and on hillsides around the country. The United States was one of the few countries that could supply the rapid airlift and logistic support needed to move reinforcements to the region. In a meeting with UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali on May 10, Vice President Al Gore pledged U.S. help with transport.

Richard Clarke, at the NSC, and representatives of the Joint Chiefs challenged Dallaire's plan. "How do you plan to take control of the airport in Kigali so that the reinforcements will be able to land?" Clarke asked. He argued instead for an "outside-in" strategy, as opposed to Dallaire's "inside-out" approach. The U.S. proposal would have created protected zones for refugees at Rwanda's borders. It would have kept any U.S. pilots involved in airlifting the peacekeepers safely out of Rwanda. "Our proposal was the most feasible, doable thing that could have been done in the short term," Clarke insists. Dallaire's proposal, in contrast, "could not be done in the short term and could not attract peacekeepers." The U.S. plan—which was modeled on Operation Provide Comfort, for the Kurds of northern Iraq—seemed to assume that the people in need were refugees fleeing to the border, but most endangered Tutsi could not

make it to the border. The most vulnerable Rwandans were those clustered together, awaiting salvation, deep inside Rwanda. Dallaire's plan would have had UN soldiers move to the Tutsi in hiding. The U.S. plan would have required civilians to move to the safe zones, negotiating murderous roadblocks on the way. "The two plans had very different objectives," Dallaire says. "My mission was to save Rwandans. Their mission was to put on a show at no risk."

America's new peacekeeping doctrine, of which Clarke was the primary architect, was unveiled on May 3, and U.S. officials applied its criteria zealously. PDD-25 did not merely circumscribe U.S. participation in UN missions; it also limited U.S. support for other states that hoped to carry out UN missions. Before such missions could garner U.S. approval, policymakers had to answer certain questions: Were U.S. interests at stake? Was there a threat to world peace? A clear mission goal? Acceptable costs? Congressional, public, and allied support? A working cease-fire? A clear command-and-control arrangement? And, finally, what was the exit strategy?

The United States haggled at the Security Council and with the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations for the first two weeks of May. U.S. officials pointed to the flaws in Dallaire's proposal without offering the resources that would have helped him to overcome them. On May 13 Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott sent Madeleine Albright instructions on how the United States should respond to Dallaire's plan. Noting the logistic hazards of airlifting troops into the capital, Talbott wrote, "The U.S. is not prepared at this point to lift heavy equipment and troops into Kigali." The "more manageable" operation would be to create the protected zones at the border, secure humanitarian-aid deliveries, and "promot[e] restoration of a ceasefire and return to the Arusha Peace Process." Talbott acknowledged that even the minimalist American proposal contained "many unanswered questions":

Where will the needed forces come from; how will they be transported ... where precisely should these safe zones be created; ... would UN forces be authorized to move out of the zones to assist affected populations not in the zones ... will the fighting parties in Rwanda agree to this arrangement ... what conditions would need to obtain for the operation to end successfully?

Nonetheless, Talbott concluded, "We would urge the UN to explore and refine this alternative and present the Council with a menu of at least two options in a formal report from the [Secretary General] along with cost estimates before the Security Council votes on changing UNAMIR's mandate." U.S. policymakers were asking valid questions. Dallaire's plan certainly would have required the intervening troops to take risks in an effort to reach the targeted Rwandans or to confront the Hutu militia and government forces. But the business-as-usual tone of the American inquiry did not seem appropriate to the unprecedented and utterly unconventional crisis that was under way.

On May 17, by which time most of the Tutsi victims of the genocide were already dead, the United States finally acceded to a version of Dallaire's plan. However, few African countries stepped forward to offer troops. Even if troops had been immediately available, the lethargy of the major powers would have hindered their use. Though the Administration had committed the United States to provide armored support if the African nations provided soldiers, Pentagon stalling resumed. On May 19 the UN formally requested fifty American armored personnel carriers. On May 31 the United States agreed to send the APCs from Germany to Entebbe, Uganda. But squabbles between the Pentagon and UN planners arose. Who would pay for the vehicles? Should the vehicles be tracked or wheeled? Would the UN buy them or simply lease them? And who would pay the shipping costs? Compounding the disputes was the fact that Department of Defense regulations prevented the U.S. Army from preparing the vehicles for transport until contracts had been signed. The Defense Department demanded that it be reimbursed \$15 million for shipping spare parts and equipment to and from Rwanda. In mid-June the White House finally intervened. On June 19, a month after the UN request, the United States began transporting the APCs, but they were missing the radios and heavy machine guns that would be needed if UN troops came under fire. By the time the APCs arrived, the genocide was over—halted by Rwandan Patriotic Front forces under the command of the Tutsi leader, Paul Kagame.

XII. THE STORIES WE TELL

It is not hard to conceive of how the United States might have done things differently. Ahead of the plane crash, as violence escalated, it could have agreed to Belgian pleas for UN reinforcements. Once the killing of thousands of Rwandans a day had begun, the President could have deployed U.S. troops to Rwanda. The United States could have joined Dallaire's beleaguered UNAMIR forces or, if it feared associating with shoddy UN peacekeeping, it could have intervened unilaterally with the Security Council's backing, as France eventually did in late June. The United States could also have acted without the UN's blessing, as it did five years later in Kosovo. Securing congressional support for U.S. intervention would have been extremely difficult, but by the second week of the killing Clinton could have made the case that something approximating genocide was under way, that a supreme American value was imperiled by its occurrence, and that U.S. contingents at relatively low risk could stop the extermination of a people.

Alan Kuperman wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that President Clinton was in the dark for two weeks; by the time a large U.S. force could deploy, it would not have saved "even half of the ultimate victims." The evidence indicates that the killers' intentions were known by mid-level officials and knowable

by their bosses within a week of the plane crash. Any failure to fully appreciate the genocide stemmed from political, moral, and imaginative weaknesses, not informational ones. As for what force could have accomplished, Kuperman's claims are purely speculative. We cannot know how the announcement of a robust or even a limited U.S. deployment would have affected the perpetrators' behavior. It is worth noting that even Kuperman concedes that belated intervention would have saved 75,000 to 125,000—no small achievement. A more serious challenge comes from the U.S. officials who argue that no amount of leadership from the White House would have overcome congressional opposition to sending U.S. troops to Africa. But even if that highly debatable point was true, the United States still had a variety of options. Instead of leaving it to mid-level officials to communicate with the Rwandan leadership behind the scenes, senior officials in the Administration could have taken control of the process. They could have publicly and frequently denounced the slaughter. They could have branded the crimes "genocide" at a far earlier stage. They could have called for the expulsion of the Rwandan delegation from the Security Council. On the telephone, at the UN, and on the Voice of America they could have threatened to prosecute those complicit in the genocide, naming names when possible. They could have deployed Pentagon assets to jam—even temporarily—the crucial, deadly radio broadcasts.

Instead of demanding a UN withdrawal, quibbling over costs, and coming forward (belatedly) with a plan better suited to caring for refugees than to stopping massacres, U.S. officials could have worked to make UNAMIR a force to contend with. They could have urged their Belgian allies to stay and protect Rwandan civilians. If the Belgians insisted on withdrawing, the White House could have done everything within its power to make sure that Dallaire was immediately reinforced. Senior officials could have spent U.S. political capital rallying troops from other nations and could have supplied strategic airlift and logistic support to a coalition that it had helped to create. In short, the United States could have led the world.

Why did none of these things happen? One reason is that all possible sources of pressure—U.S. allies, Congress, editorial boards, and the American people—were mute when it mattered for Rwanda. American leaders have a circular and deliberate relationship to public opinion. It is circular because public opinion is rarely if ever aroused by foreign crises, even genocidal ones, in the absence of political leadership, and yet at the same time, American leaders continually cite the absence of public support as grounds for inaction. The relationship is deliberate because American leadership is not absent in such circumstances: it was present regarding Rwanda, but devoted mainly to suppressing public outrage and thwarting UN initiatives so as to avoid acting.

Strikingly, most officials involved in shaping U.S. policy were able to define the decision not to stop genocide

as ethical and moral. The Administration employed several devices to keep down enthusiasm for action and to preserve the public's sense—and, more important, its own—that U.S. policy choices were not merely politically astute but also morally acceptable. First, Administration officials exaggerated the extremity of the possible responses. Time and again U.S. leaders posed the choice as between staying out of Rwanda and "getting involved everywhere." In addition, they often presented the choice as one between doing nothing and sending in the Marines. On May 25, at the Naval Academy graduation ceremony, Clinton described America's relationship to ethnic trouble spots: "We cannot turn away from them, but our interests are not sufficiently at stake in so many of them to justify a commitment of our folks."

Second, Administration policymakers appealed to notions of the greater good. They did not simply frame U.S. policy as one contrived in order to advance the national interest or avoid U.S. casualties. Rather, they often argued against intervention from the standpoint of people committed to protecting human life. Owing to recent failures in UN peacekeeping, many humanitarian interventionists in the U.S. government were concerned about the future of America's relationship with the United Nations generally and peacekeeping specifically. They believed that the UN and humanitarianism could not afford another Somalia. Many internalized the belief that the UN had more to lose by sending reinforcements and failing than by allowing the killings to proceed. Their chief priority, after the evacuation of the Americans, was looking after UN peacekeepers, and they justified the withdrawal of the peacekeepers on the grounds that it would ensure a future for humanitarian intervention. In other words, Dallaire's peacekeeping mission in Rwanda had to be destroyed so that peacekeeping might be saved for use elsewhere.

A third feature of the response that helped to console U.S. officials at the time was the sheer flurry of Rwanda-related activity. U.S. officials with a special concern for Rwanda took their solace from mini-victories—working on behalf of specific individuals or groups (Monique Mujawamariya; the Rwandans gathered at the hotel). Government officials involved in policy met constantly and remained "seized of the matter"; they neither appeared nor felt indifferent. Although little in the way of effective intervention emerged from mid-level meetings in Washington or New York, an abundance of memoranda and other documents did.

Finally, the almost willful delusion that what was happening in Rwanda did not amount to genocide created a nurturing ethical framework for inaction. "War" was "tragic" but created no moral imperative.

What is most frightening about this story is that it testifies to a system that in effect worked. President Clinton and his advisers had several aims. First, they wanted to avoid engagement in a conflict that posed little threat to American interests, narrowly defined. Second, they sought



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to appease a restless Congress by showing that they were cautious in their approach to peacekeeping. And third, they hoped to contain the political costs and avoid the moral stigma associated with allowing genocide. By and large, they achieved all three objectives. The normal operations of the foreign-policy bureaucracy and the international community permitted an illusion of continual deliberation, complex activity, and intense concern, even as Rwandans were left to die.

One U.S. official kept a journal during the crisis. In late May, exasperated by the obstructionism pervading the bureaucracy, the official dashed off this lament:

A military that wants to go nowhere to do anything—or let go of their toys so someone else can do it. A White House cowed by the brass (and we are to give lessons on how the armed forces take orders from civilians?). An NSC that does peacekeeping by the book—the accounting book, that is. And an assistance program that prefers whites (Europe) to blacks. When it comes to human rights we have no problem drawing the line in the sand of the dark continent (just don't ask us to *do* anything—agonizing is our specialty), but not China or anyplace else business looks good.

We have a foreign policy based on our amoral eco-

foreign-policy team, angry with them for not steering him toward a moral course. He is said to have convinced himself that if he had known more, he would have done more. In his 1998 remarks in Kigali he pledged to “strengthen our ability to prevent, and if necessary to stop, genocide.” “Never again,” he declared, “must we be shy in the face of evidence.” But the incentive structures within the U.S. government have not changed. Officials will still suffer no sanction if they do nothing to curb atrocities. The national interest remains narrowly constructed to exclude stopping genocide. Indeed, George W. Bush has been open about his intention to keep U.S. troops away from any future Rwandas. “I don’t like genocide,” Bush said in January of 2000. “But I would not commit our troops.” Officials in the Bush Administration say the United States is as unprepared and unwilling to stop genocide today as it was seven years ago. “Genocide could happen again tomorrow,” one said, “and we wouldn’t respond any differently.”

Anthony Lake, who used to call himself “the national-security adviser to the free world,” today teaches international relations at Georgetown University. He wonders, as he should, how he and his colleagues could have done so

During the entire three months of the genocide President Clinton never assembled his top policy advisers to discuss the Rwanda killings. Anthony Lake likewise never gathered the “principals”—the Cabinet-level members of the foreign-policy team—to discuss the genocide.

nomic interests run by amateurs who want to stand for something—hence the agony—but ultimately don’t want to exercise any leadership that has a cost.

They say there may be as many as a million massacred in Rwanda. The militias continue to slay the innocent and the educated ... Has it really cost the United States nothing?

XIII. A CONTINUUM OF GUILT

Because this is a story of nondecisions and bureaucratic business as usual, few Americans are haunted by the memory of what they did in response to genocide in Rwanda. Most senior officials remember only fleeting encounters with the topic while the killings were taking place. The more reflective among them puzzle occasionally over how developments that cast the darkest shadow over the Clinton Administration’s foreign-policy record could have barely registered at the time. But most say they have not talked in any detail among themselves about the events or about the system’s weaknesses (and perverse strengths). Requests for a congressional investigation have gone ignored.

According to several advisers, toward the end of his term of office Clinton himself snapped at members of his

little at the time of the Rwandan genocide. Much of Lake’s identity remains entwined with the ideas in his 1971 *Foreign Policy* article. He cannot quite understand how a White House that, he insists, was finally sensitive to the “human reality of realpolitik” could have stood by during one of the gravest crimes of the twentieth century. “One scenario is that I knew what was going on and I blocked it out in order to not deal with the human consequences,” he says. “Here I’m absolutely convinced that I didn’t do that, but maybe I did and it was so deep that I didn’t realize it. Another scenario is that I didn’t give it enough time because I didn’t give a damn about Africa, which I don’t believe because I know I do. My sin must have been in a third scenario. I didn’t own it because I was busy with Bosnia and Haiti, or because I thought we were doing all we could ...”

Lake is further confounded by his slow processing of the moral stakes of the genocide. After the Rwandan Patriotic Front seized control, in July, several million Hutu refugees, including many of those responsible for the genocide, fled to Zaire and Tanzania. With a humanitarian crisis looming, Lake took control, spearheading a multilateral aid effort. “There are people dying,” his colleagues remember his saying. “The President wants to do this, and we don’t

care what it takes.” In December of 1994 Lake visited putrid mass graves in Rwanda. He does not understand how, after 800,000 people were killed, he could have felt angry but not at all responsible. “What’s so strange is that this didn’t become a ‘how did we screw this up?’ issue until a couple years later,” he says. “The humanitarian-aid mission did not feel like a guilt mission.”

Since senior officials in the U.S. government hadn’t felt responsible when the killings were actually happening, it should not be altogether surprising that most didn’t feel responsible after the fact. With the potential for an American military presence dismissed out of hand, Rwanda policy was formulated and debated heatedly by U.S. officials further down the chain. Because Lake never took control of the policy, the sense of responsibility he eventually acquired, although genuine, seems superimposed. He has an academic understanding that under the principle of command responsibility, those at the top must answer even for policies they do not remember consciously crafting. But lurking at the margins of Lake’s consciousness seems to be an awareness that in light of press coverage at the time, he must have simply chosen to look away. And as disengaged as he was from the policy, he probably qualifies as the most engaged U.S. official in the Clinton Cabinet. “I’m not going to wallow,” he says, “because if you blew it you should not wallow or ask for public forgiveness. But in a way I’m as guilty as anybody else, because to the degree that I didn’t care about Africa, it would be understandable, but since I was more inclined to care, I don’t know why I didn’t.”

Lake’s guilt is of a second order—guilt over an absence of guilt. What about the other officials involved in Washington’s Rwanda policy—how do they view their performance in retrospect? Today they have three main options.

They can defend the U.S. policy. This is the position of Richard Clarke, who believes, all things considered, that he and his colleagues did everything they could and should have done. “Would I have done the same thing again?” Clarke asks. “Absolutely. What we offered was a peacekeeping force that would have been effective. What [the UN] offered was exactly what we said it would be—a force that would take months to get there. If the UN had adopted the U.S. [outside-in] proposal, we might have saved some lives ... The U.S. record, as compared to everyone else’s record, is not something we should run away from ... I don’t think we should be embarrassed. I think everyone else should be embarrassed by what they did, or did not do.”

Another position holds that no matter what any one person did at the time, there were larger forces at work: genocide would have consumed Rwanda no matter what, and American decision-makers in the White House or on Capitol Hill would never have countenanced the risks required to make a real difference. Radio jamming and other technical fixes were merely palliatives aimed at soothing

guilty consciences. This is the view adopted by many Pentagon officials who worked on the issue day-to-day.

The least-inviting option leaves those involved questioning their performances and wondering what they should have done differently: Saved even one life by pushing harder? Chosen a telling moment for a high-profile resignation? “Maybe the only way to draw attention to this was to run naked through the building,” Prudence Bushnell says. “I’m not sure anybody would have noticed, but I wish I had tried.”

Africa specialists are the ones most affected by the Rwandan genocide. David Rawson, the former ambassador to Rwanda, retired in 1999. He lives with his wife in Michigan and has begun to write about his experiences. He still believes that efforts to pursue a cease-fire were worthwhile, and that “both sides” have a lot to answer for. But he acknowledges, “In retrospect, perhaps we were—as diplomats always are, I suppose—so focused on trying to find some agreement that we didn’t look hard enough at the darker side.” Predisposed toward state actors, trusting of negotiation and diplomacy, and courtly toward his interlocutors, Rawson, the diplomat, was outmatched.

Donald Steinberg, the NSC staffer who managed the NSC’s Africa directorate, felt a deep emotional attachment to the continent. He had tacked the photos of two six-year-old African girls he had sponsored above his desk at the White House. But when he began seeing the bodies clogging the Kagera River, he had to take the photos down, unable to bear the reminder of innocent lives being extinguished every minute. The directorate, which was tiny, had little influence on policy. It was, in the parlance, “rolled” by Richard Clarke. “Dick was a thinker,” one colleague says. “Don was a feeler. They represented the duality of Bill Clinton and his presidency, which was torn between the thinkers, who looked out for interests, and the feelers, who were moved by values. As we all know, in the end it was always going to be the thinkers who won out.” After the genocide, according to friends and colleagues, Steinberg threw himself into the humanitarian relief effort, where at last he might make a difference. But eventually he plummeted into depression. He asked himself again and again, if only he had been at the White House longer ... if only he had known how to pull the right levers at the right time ... if only he had ... ? Now deputy director of policy planning at the State Department, Steinberg has told friends that his work from here on out is “repayment for a very large bill that I owe.”

Susan Rice, Clarke’s co-worker on peacekeeping at the NSC, also feels that she has a debt to repay. “There was such a huge disconnect between the logic of each of the decisions we took along the way during the genocide and the moral consequences of the decisions taken collectively,” Rice says. “I swore to myself that if I ever faced such a crisis again, I would come down on the side of dramatic action, going

down in flames if that was required.” Rice was subsequently appointed NSC Africa director and, later, assistant secretary of state for African affairs; she visited Rwanda several times and helped to launch a small program geared to train selected African armies so that they might be available to respond to the continent’s next genocide. The American appetite for troop deployments in Africa had not improved.

Prudence Bushnell will carry Rwanda with her permanently. During the genocide, when she went walking in the woods near her home in Reston, Virginia, she would see Rwandan mothers cowering with their children behind the trees, or stacked in neat piles along the bike path. After the genocide, when the new President of Rwanda visited Washington and met Bushnell and others, he leaned across the table toward her, eyes blazing, and said, “You, madame, are partially responsible for the genocide, because we told you what was going to happen and you did nothing.” Haunted by these memories and admonitions, when Bushnell was later appointed ambassador to Kenya and saw that her embassy was insecure, she was much more assertive, and pleaded repeatedly with Washington for security to be upgraded—requests that were, notoriously, ignored. The bombing of the U.S. embassy in Kenya will forever be encapsulated in American minds by the image of a bloodied Bushnell staggering away from the explosion with a towel pressed to her wounds.

Currently serving as ambassador to Guatemala, Bushnell can muster a black humor about the way death and killing keep hounding her. Like Steinberg, she is trying to make peace with her inability to have secured even the tamest commitments from her colleagues in the bureaucracy. “For a long time I couldn’t live with it, but now I think I can look back and say, ‘I knew what was happening, I tried to stop what was happening, and I failed.’ That is not a source of guilt, but it is a tremendous source of shame and sadness.”

And then, finally, there is Romeo Dallaire. It is both paradoxical and natural that the man who probably did the most to save Rwandans feels the worst. When he returned to Canada, in August of 1994, he behaved initially as if he had just completed a routine mission. As the days passed, though, he began to show signs of distress. He carried a machete around and lectured cadets on post-traumatic stress disorder; he slept sparingly; and he found himself nearly retching in the supermarket, transported back to Rwandan markets and the bodies strewn within them. When the international war-crimes tribunal called him to testify, he plunged back into the memories and his mental health worsened. Dallaire was told by his superiors that he would have to choose between leaving the “Rwanda business” behind him or leaving his beloved armed forces. For Dallaire only one answer was possible: “I told them I would never give up Rwanda,” he says. “I was the force commander and I would complete my duty, testifying and doing whatever it takes to bring these guys to justice.” In April of

2000 Dallaire was forced out of the Canadian armed services and given a medical discharge.

Dallaire had always said, “The day I take my uniform off will be the day that I will also respond to my soul.” But since becoming a civilian he has realized that his soul is not readily retrievable. “My soul is in Rwanda,” he says. “It has never, ever come back, and I’m not sure it ever will.” He carries the guilt of the genocide with him, and he feels that the eyes and the spirits of those killed are constantly watching him. He says he can barely stand living and has attempted suicide.

In June of last year a brief Canadian news-wire story reported that Dallaire had been found unconscious on a park bench in Hull, Quebec, drunk and alone. He had consumed a bottle of scotch on top of his daily dose of pills for post-traumatic stress disorder. He was on a death mission. Dallaire sent a letter to the Canadian Broadcast Corporation thanking them for their sensitive coverage of this episode. On July 3, 2000, the letter was read on the air.

Thank you for the very kind thoughts and wishes.

There are times when the best medication and therapist simply can’t help a soldier suffering from this new generation of peacekeeping injury. The anger, the rage, the hurt, and the cold loneliness that separates you from your family, friends, and society’s normal daily routine are so powerful that the option of destroying yourself is both real and attractive. That is what happened last Monday night. It appears, it grows, it invades, and it overpowers you.

In my current state of therapy, which continues to show very positive results, control mechanisms have not yet matured to always be on top of this battle. My doctors and I are still [working to] establish the level of serenity and productivity that I yearn so much for. The therapists agree that the battle I waged that night was a solid example of the human trying to come out from behind the military leader’s ethos of “My mission first, my personnel, then myself.” Obviously the venue I used last Monday night left a lot to be desired and will be the subject of a lot of work over the next while.

Dallaire remained a true believer in Canada, in peacekeeping, in human rights. The letter went on:

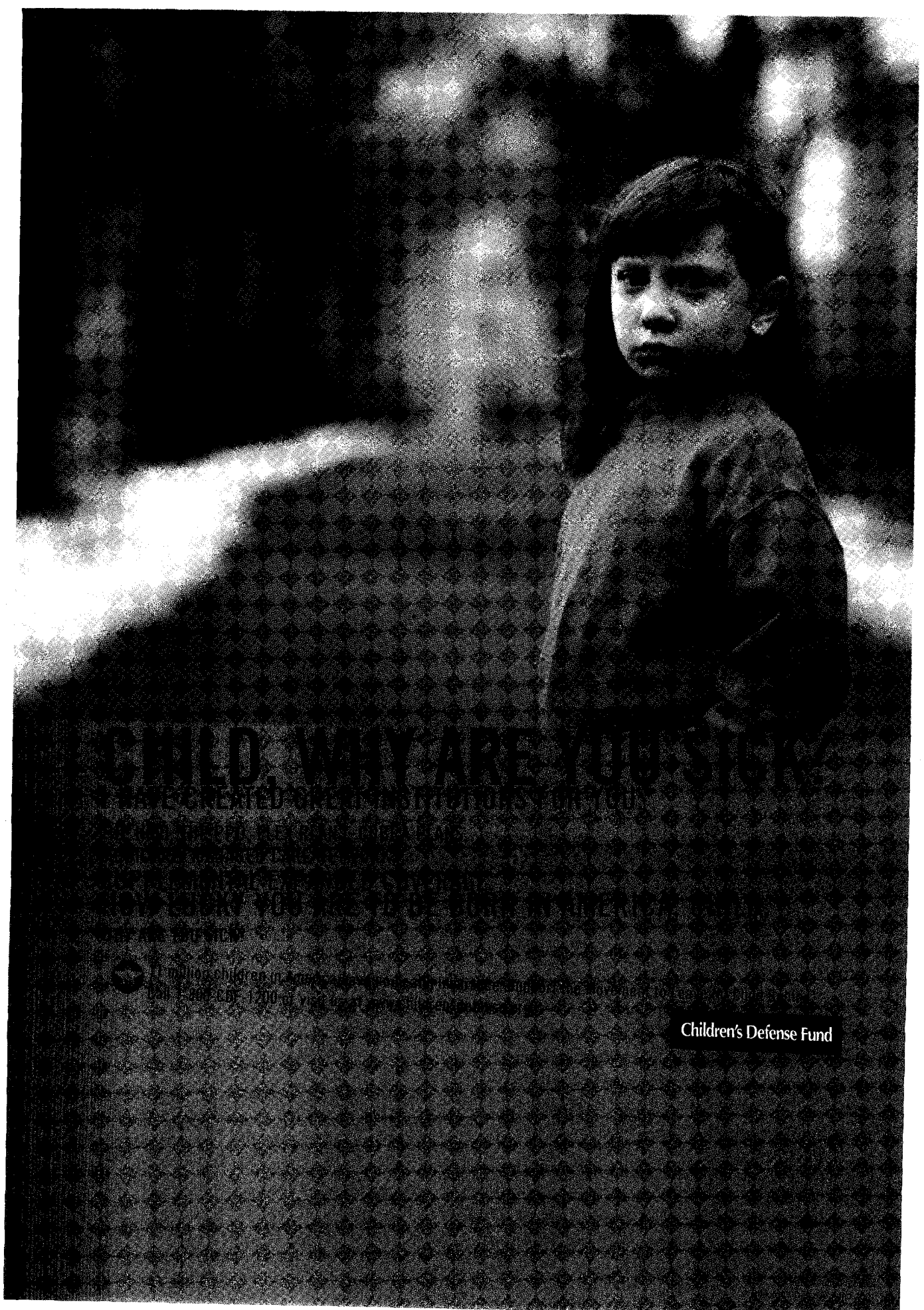
This nation, without any hesitation nor doubt, is capable and even expected by the less fortunate of this globe to lead the developed countries beyond self-interest, strategic advantages, and isolationism, and raise their sights to the realm of the pre-eminence of humanism and freedom ... Where humanitarianism is being destroyed and the innocent are being literally trampled into the ground ... the soldiers, sailors, and airpersons ... supported by fellow countrymen who recognize the cost in human sacrifice and in resources will forge in concert with our politicians ... a most unique and exemplary place for Canada in the league of nations, united under the United Nations Charter.

I hope this is okay.

Thanks for the opportunity.

Warmest regards,

Dallaire



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WE'VE LEFT THEM TO ROT.

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DIGGING

A short story

BY BETH LORDAN

.....

So one day a farmer—his name was Seamus Sullivan, and this was in County Mayo, not far from Knock, where, when Seamus was fifteen, the Virgin had appeared—says to the wife, “I’m off up the field, then,” and he goes off in his boots in the early afternoon with the dog at his heel and a shovel in his hand. His only idea is to be out there, as far from the house as he can go without leaving his own bit of land, digging; what he wants is the heft and smell and slide of his own earth at his command. He doesn’t wonder whether a man can own something like land; he owns this field and the dirt within it, and the field goes straight down to the center of the earth.

So he goes after the roots of a furze bush. It’s the first edge of spring, and thin lips of yellow show here and there on the bush. This digging is hard work, starting away from the thorny bush to make sure he’s beyond the spread of the roots, but it’s a long day ahead with nothing else he need do, and he dedicates himself to it. He’s forty-five, still strong enough to spend the whole day driving the shovel in and piling the good dirt out. But the furze is a shallow weed, and after only an hour the excuse work is mostly done, the thorny bush as root-exposed as if he were planting it instead of casting it out. So he pulls it to the center of the field and sets it afire. Then he goes back to crouch beside his dug pit and roll a cigarette with his dog lolling beside him while the bush burns. It’s a pitch-filled thing, a furze bush, so it burns hot and fast. As he tosses the damp end bit of tobacco and paper away, he sees the wife standing down by their house, shading her eyes to watch the last of the flames. Bridget is just a girl still after two years of being married to him, who’s older than her husband ought to be. That’s enough; he stands and takes up his shovel again.

Maybe the sun comes out for a few minutes, and he feels so good, digging in the thin sunlight in his field, that he wonders why he doesn’t do this once a week. His muscles are limber, the rhythm steady, and then his shovel hits something not dirt. Even that, even the challenge of going now into the next layer of his land, where rocks will complicate the digging—even that feels good. He moves the shovel back a few inches and drives it in again and lifts up the dirt and sees there, mud-encrusted and bent, a chalice, the gold pale and shining where his shovel has struck it.

So there stands Seamus, rubbing the dirt from the cup with his broad, calloused fingers for a few seconds before he looks guiltily down the slope to see if Bridget is still watching him. She isn’t, so he has a chance to decide: Will he keep digging and see if he can find more? Will he take just this one thing? Will he have a good look and then, tenderly, tuck it back where it came from and replace the dirt and pray for the grass to grow over it all?

In this same midafternoon, in Cork instead of Mayo, Mary Alice O’Driscoll comes hurrying along the road into Clonakilty, tears in her pretty eyes. She’s nineteen and a strapping girl, tall and strong, and she has dreams. This is a difficult situation, being a strapping girl with dreams, because nobody believes the combination is natural. Her sister Rosie is the beauty, and people assume she has dreams, but Mary Alice is sturdy, and her mother, a practical woman, sees no reason for Mary Alice not to marry Jimmy Curtin, who owns his own boat and has the hope of a house when his father passes on. He’s a hard worker and a decent man, and if Mary Alice would just be reasonable, she’d see that decency is quite a bit to get in a husband, and Jimmy’s not that old, not forty yet, and he fancies the girl.

Mary Alice *is* reasonable, so she has already abandoned any number of dreams without ever having mentioned them to anyone—gracefulness, for example, and a piano, a quick wit in conversation, a holiday in Switzerland, and a wedding in Saint Colman’s Cathedral, in Queenstown, the most beautiful thing she has ever seen and as far from Rosscarbery as she’s ever been—but now her mother says she can’t go to the dance on Saturday in Glandore. Missing the dance shouldn’t matter, given all those other things she knows she’ll never have, but it does matter. Mary Alice believes her heart is breaking. So she’s on her way down the road to complain to her aunt Margaret, who was the strapping sister herself and knows where you end up if you don’t hold on to some dream—where she is, housekeeper to the priest.

So here’s Mary Alice, her head up so that the tears won’t spill, tapping at the kitchen door of the priest’s house, tapping and tapping, and not until Father Moran himself, a book in his hand, pulls open the door does she realize that she has come into town with her apron still on and her hair still in



last night's plait. Not that Father Moran is tidy, standing there in his stocking feet and his hair mussed as if he has just waked up and here it is almost time for his tea.

"Oh, Father," she says, "I'm sorry to bother you. I was looking for Aunt Margaret."

"You were, of course," he says, but because he has, indeed, only just waked from a doze in his chair, his voice is much curter than he intended, and Mary Alice loses her hold on her tears, and they fall from her pretty eyes in two silver lines down her face.

She has no idea how lovely she looks to Father Moran, who isn't a young man but also isn't old enough to be her father.

Father Moran himself hardly has any idea of how lovely she looks to him, at this dusky moment in the kitchen when her aunt Margaret isn't there and he's barely awake and can't tell exactly who he is, priest or man, but he manages to say, "Here, now, what's this all about?"

Mary Alice can't say what it's all about, not to him, not in his stocking feet, and so she sobs four times, trying to think of an appropriate thing to say to a priest, and says, "I was thinking of Saint Colman's Cathedral."

Father Moran has seen Saint Colman's Cathedral, so he almost understands why this girl—he has known her name at some moment, though it escapes him now—weeps so hopelessly, and he's touched by it, and moved to transfer his book from his left hand to his right, and to reach his left hand out to touch and comfort her. He means to pat her shoulder in a fatherly, priestly gesture, but his hand takes itself instead to her cheek, where the tears are cool against her firm, warm skin.

As soon as she has spoken, Mary Alice begins actually to think of Saint Colman's, its soaring beauty, and how she'll never be a bride there, never have a life that includes a piano or quick wit or holidays, all because her mother won't allow her to go to the dance in Glandore this Saturday night, where some young man might magically appear who would love her, and when the priest's gentle hand touches her tears, she has no choice in the matter; she covers his hand with her own and presses it to her face, and before either of them is quite certain why or how such a thing could happen, his book is on the floor and their mouths are sweet together with salt tears on all their lips.

By now Seamus has come in for his tea, with his chest full of his secret. Bridget sees that he has got something going on, something that makes him feel big this evening, and she wonders about it as she cuts the bread. He's been nowhere, just up the field the whole afternoon, digging. She has her doubts about whether potatoes will grow there in the second field, the sun's so poor below the hill, but the potatoes are his business. What is hers is this house, this empty house, with no child in it.

"Come up," he says behind her, and she hears the dog clip from the corner and into his lap.

So, Bridget thinks. So. And she cuts the bread thicker. When she has finished, she cooks him a buttered egg and brings out the last jar of her sister's blackberry jam. Her sister has the five boys and two girls. "Is it Christmas?" he asks when he comes to the table, but he's gentle about it, and she smiles just a bit, pouring the tea. "The field's ready, is it?" she says, and he says it is, nearly.

After the meal he goes out with the dog and smokes again, looking up at the field where the cup and four gold bracelets lie hidden in the dirt, though he can feel their presence still behind his ribs. He has dug them a deeper hiding place up there, and will leave them for now. He has nowhere to sell them, and no idea how to explain where the money came from if he did. Besides, he thinks the gold isn't that kind of treasure. It's something else, and he has spent the afternoon trying to get it figured out—how the gold stands for something ancient and splendid and connected to him. He has decided that when he's got it straight in his head, the time will come and he'll go to the priest and tell him what he's found, and ask him to write to the proper people so they can come and get it and take it to the museum. They'll make a card for it, he thinks, saying SEAMUS SULLIVAN, COUNTY MAYO. All day the idea of that card has been growing in him, a weighted restlessness in his chest, as he's been digging. He'll plant potatoes there when the time comes. It's no sin, he's sure, to take his pleasure privately now, thinking of himself as a man with gold in his field. No sin, either, to turn to his wife in bed tonight and take that pleasure as well; and when the time comes, when the washing up is done and the fire's banked and the two of them sigh into their rest, he does so, and she answers him gladly, a rare easy sweetness between them. As he falls asleep, his last thought is of the shimmering power of gold hidden in a field; hers is that these moments may get them a child.

Before that happens, back in the kitchen in Clonakilty, Mary Alice, weak in the knees, and Father Moran, utterly without a thought in his head, linger through the long moment of their kiss as if dependent for balance on their joined mouths, as if suspended from each other's lips, or from their hands on her cheek. And then, of course, they hear a sound from somewhere, a reminder that Aunt Margaret hasn't vanished from the earth, that priests and

girls with pretty eyes aren't free to kiss in kitchens in this world, and they lurch apart. For a single second they stare at each other, blankly, and then the horror gathers. She turns and flies out of the house and down the narrow street of the town, eyes dry now and nearly blind. As soon as she's free of the houses, she turns off the road and sets out across the fields for home.

A mile or so along, as she's walking more slowly but still not daring to think of anything, she sees below her the ring of standing stones that people call the Druid's Altar. The light is failing fast, and the stones take on the look of giant shawled women, some standing, some kneeling. She takes herself down from the little ridge to them, between them, into the center of the circle.

"I've kissed a priest," she says aloud.

Maybe she sways with the enormity of what she has done, and it's just an illusion that the stone women stir, but Mary Alice O'Driscoll doesn't wait to see whether the women are welcoming her or casting her out. She takes to her heels, down across the fields in the twilight, and rushes into the kitchen, where her mother is getting the tea with a scowl on her face. Breathless, she says, "I'll marry him, Mother—I'll marry Jimmy if you say." What else could she do, a girl who would tempt a priest and bring stones to life by confessing it? If she didn't marry as quick as that, who knows what shame she might bring on them all?

So, say that was a Tuesday, in March of 1910. By Sunday, when the banns are read for Mary Alice O'Driscoll and James Patrick Curtin, Seamus Sullivan has been laid to rest (that weight in his chest was his heart failing, and he never knew, dreaming of his neighbors thumping his back in congratulation when the gold came pouring out of his land, and he may be dreaming it still, if heaven is as it should be), and Bridget's brother Pat has walked the three fields and found them poor, Seamus's plan for potatoes in the second field foolishness. He'll let it go back to grass and put his own sheep on it. He does that, and takes Bridget to keep house for him half a mile away, and when her son is born, in the winter, he'll be the one who insists the child be named Kevin, for their father, instead of Seamus, for his own. By that time, down in Cork, Mary Alice will be amazed to find herself a little in love with Jimmy Curtin, whose awkward chatter covers a thousand apt generousities, and when their first child is born, the next year, his name, without question, is James. Nor does the family hesitate when the chance comes for them (three more of them now, all strapping children), through the death of one cousin and the emigration of three others, to move to a small house in Galway. And of course the boys will follow their father and become fishermen. In fact, the only question that ever disturbs Mary Alice arises when her James comes to her at the age of fifteen and says, "Mother, I've a calling to be a priest." "You have not," she says, but he scowls and says, "Why not?"

I've the marks, and Father Kennedy says—" And what can she say but "I don't care what Father Kennedy says, you'll be no priest"? That's as close as she'll ever come to allowing herself to remember the forbidden salty kiss in the kitchen, and that's a story she'll never tell to a soul.

Seamus's story of finding the gold never gets told either, and the gold is never found, so when Bridget dies, with Kevin only eleven, his uncle Pat sees no reason not to take him off to America, where things will have to be better than they are at home with all the mess there is now. It's 1922, and who knows how things will turn out? So off they go, leaving the two houses to fall down around themselves, and if South Boston doesn't vault Pat into the prosperity he expected, it does vault young Kevin into a world of street corners and movies and—once he leaves school, at just fifteen—pubs and nicknames and fistfights. He's one of a gang of fellows on the corner of E Street and Bowen; they all live at home, work here and there on the docks and in the factories, fight about anything, spend their money foolishly, and try to impress girls. When Kevin's twenty, he falls mad in love with a girl five years older, and before he knows what he's about, he's going to be a father. It's 1931 now, and he sees no way to avoid taking his bride back to the cramped flat over the barbershop and Uncle Pat's vicious hospitality. He's twenty-one when his son, Lyle, is born, and twenty-two on Christmas Eve when, far gone in drink, he decides to swim the icy Charles River to sober up before going home to the wife and kid.

This same Christmas Eve, 1932, back in Galway City, James Curtin, who has put away his wish to be a priest as his mother once put away her wish to go to Switzerland, proposes marriage to Norah Silke, who turns him down. Two months later he marries her sister Maeve. They have a daughter, Roísín, and then another daughter, Mary, and then sons; before the sons are old enough to go out on the boat, which James has always hated, he sells the boat and buys a poor bit of land. But he has no talent as a farmer, and when his children offer to leave—Mary for America, one son to be a priest, another for Australia—he's glad to have them go. He's a harsh man, and real poverty makes him more so; but he's no worse than other fathers, better than some, which Maeve tells the children so often that even she believes it.

So when Lyle Sullivan and Mary Curtin meet at last, in 1960, at a huge company picnic on Cape Cod, they could have a load of stories to tell each other, but they don't. Mary doesn't work for the company; she has come with a girlfriend who does, and the girlfriend insists that Mary's perfectly welcome. Her whole life—she's twenty-four—Mary has worried about being where she doesn't belong, and she has never quite figured out where she does

belong. When she knew she was going to America, she was terrified and excited; once she got there, she was so homesick that she'd have gone back if she'd had the money, and if the ones at home hadn't needed the money she sent. She can't imagine living her whole life so far from home, but now that she's been here a year, she can't imagine what life she'd be living if she were still there. So even here, at a picnic, she doesn't dare go very far from her friend and doesn't join in conversations. That's where she is when Lyle first sees her.

He doesn't know that she looks a lot like his grandmother Bridget, who wore her long, dark, curling hair much the way Mary wears hers, in a soft bun high on her head, and whose mouth had a similar sweet patience. He doesn't know what Bridget looked like because he has never seen the one photograph of her, which his mother hoards, along with the eight other things that belonged to his father, Kevin, in a locked metal box in the back of her closet. He won't even find that box until after his mother's death, three years later; when Mary comes back from Ireland to marry him, she'll have cut her hair and taken to setting it on brush rollers for the bouffant effect that is the American style in 1963. This day on Cape Cod all he knows is that she looks good to him. He doesn't even think of her as pretty, although she is, and it's a good thing he doesn't. Long ago he developed the unconscious habit of avoiding anything that might distract him from his duty to his mother, so he never speaks to girls he thinks of as pretty. This isn't his mother's fault: she's not old in her mid-fifties, not bitter or pitiful. True, she has always tried to impress upon Lyle the dangers of drink and wild friends—but hasn't she good reason for that, since drink and wild friends killed her young husband and left her with a son to raise and no skills beyond laundry work, which she couldn't do anymore after she hurt her back, when Lyle was only seventeen? Not exactly her fault, or his, but it has come to this: Lyle lives the life of a middle-aged husband, although he's only twenty-eight. He's good at his office job with a hardware company, frugal, responsible. He likes some television programs, and he likes to drink a beer or, more rarely, a little whiskey and play a game or two of Hearts in the evening with his mother in the oddly comforting cloud of her cigarette smoke. He's not unhappy, and he's not particularly eager to marry, but still, this pretty day on Cape Cod, the girl in the dark skirt and soft blouse looks good to him, and he keeps an eye on her, the way she's shy but cheery, and when he passes almost accidentally near enough to hear her talking with her friend, he hears that she's Irish, and he's a goner.

He doesn't recognize that he's a goner though. He has never been a goner before. As a teenager, back in Vermont, he kissed a few girls and longed in a shameful way for others, and once, after he brought his mother back to Boston to live, he dated one woman three times. But he hasn't been a goner. He thinks he feels sorry for this girl, so far from

home, and that in itself is so unusual for him that it's almost dusk, almost time for the fireworks, before he finds a way to meet her.

She's alone at last—her friend has gone to get them some more lemonade. She's alone, crouching to spread the blanket where she and her friend will sit to watch the fireworks, and dusk is coming on, and the ocean is stirring, and she hasn't the least hint how appealing she looks to Lyle. He sees the domesticity of her task, and remembers the quick, dancing, foreign murmur of her voice. He isn't given to imagining (Mary's friend, who works in his department, calls him rude and bossy), but he imagines that she might be lonely, and that's what he means to ask her when he comes up beside her—he means to say something like "You're far from home," in the sort of joking tone he assumes men use with women they haven't met yet. Instead he says, "Hello—I'm Lyle Sullivan, from Production Control," just as if it were a staff meeting. Mary gives a little leap, she's so startled.

She has been thinking not of home but of underwear, actually—about the difference between Irish underwear and American underwear in her admittedly limited experience. Her job is minding the children of the Cunninghams, in Brookline, who lent her the fare to come over. The oldest of the Cunningham children is a girl, twelve, rather pretty, who has been teasing her mother for pettipants; for days now Mary has been wondering in odd moments just what

pettipants might be, whether they're something she ought to buy. In April she finished paying her debt to the Cunninghams. She now sends half her small salary back to Roisín each month and saves most of the rest, but she has a bit she keeps out for pleasure, and she's wondering if the cost of pettipants (whatever they are) would match the pleasure of them. That's what she's wondering when this fellow comes up and startles her.

She blushes, because of the underwear and because he's the fellow she noticed earlier and asked her friend about and because he has recognized, as she knew someone would, that she has no right to be at the picnic.

He blushes, because he didn't mean to startle her and didn't mean to say such a stupid thing, but there they are.

Mary straightens up and puts out her hand. "I'm Mary Curtin, from Galway," she says, and she smiles, because she's relieved at last of the dread of discovery that has tagged behind her all day. "I don't work for the company," she says.

He's handsomer than she thought, though she thought him handsome enough in the sunshine and from a distance.

She's lovely, looking up at him with that smile, and the quick, cooing way she says *doon't* and *coompany*; he nearly forgets to shake her hand.

Maybe the first of the rockets goes up then and bursts in gold and silver in the sky. Or maybe Lyle gathers his wits and asks where Galway is, or where she does work, and they talk a little more before her friend comes back and Lyle takes his leave. They won't turn out to be the sort of couple that reminisces about their first meeting; years from now, when their younger son, Jimmy, asks her, bitterly, "How did you end up with him, anyway?" she'll just say, "I met him at a picnic." If in saying that she remembers any of this—the fireworks, and how the crowd around her made a full, reverent chorus of their pleasure while she hugged to herself the thrilling certainty that shy, handsome Lyle Sullivan from Production Control fancied her—she won't say so.

It'll be their older son, Kevin, when he's about ten and curious, who asks his father, "Did Mom used to be pretty?" Maybe the question lurches Lyle back to this moment, standing in the dark beneath the brilliant, slow explosions of light, studying how straight her back is; then she turns and bends toward her friend and something in the tilting of her body wallops him with a desire so harsh he makes a sound. Maybe that's why his answer to his son is so harsh—"What difference does that make?" He can't answer his son directly, can he? Or tell how he was utterly certain, talking to her, that if he put out his hand and touched the spun darkness of the hair at her temple, her smile would only deepen?

So. No stories get told this night, and the story of this night will never be told, even between them, but it goes on for all that. Lyle goes home a goner, Mary goes home just as

DARKNESS STARTS

A shadow in the shape of a house
slides out of a house
and loses its shape on the lawn.

Trees seek each other
as the wind within them dies.

Darkness starts inside of things
but keeps on going when the things are gone.

Barefoot careless in the farthest parts of the yard
children become their cries.

—CHRISTIAN WIMAN

bad, and then the waiting part begins, because this is still 1960, long before young ladies began telephoning young men, and this is still Lyle, who hasn't stopped being cautious and mostly content just because of the way a girl he met says "It's grand, so," and makes him imagine touching her hair. When he can't get her voice out of his head but begins to be afraid that he doesn't remember it quite right, he still has to work his way around to finding out where she is, and that involves her friend in his department, and with one thing and another it's well into September before he telephones her and asks her to a movie. She says yes, and says yes when he calls her again, although it's October by then; this is the pattern of almost involuntary patience she'll never quite lose and he'll never quite recognize as patience, which will make him even more impatient with everyone else in his life, including his sons, who don't practice it in his behalf. But by the time he calls her again, to invite her to Thanksgiving dinner to meet his mother (things have gone that well, or that inevitably), she's gone.

Years later she'll tell stories of her childhood, of Irish people and Irish adventures, funny stories and inspiring stories and now and then a sad story, but she'll never tell the story of how she answered the doorbell and took the telegram that was addressed to Mary Curtin and stared at it as if it weren't her own name. She'll never explain how distant her own horror at herself seemed when she read the words MOTHER DYING and heard herself thinking *I'd be too late*. She'll never admit that she doesn't know what she'd have done next if her employer hadn't come into the corridor then and asked what was wrong.

But she doesn't have to know that, because Mrs. Cunningham does come into the corridor, so Mary does the right things. She explains, she apologizes; she has the price of the ticket back in her savings; she must go; she doesn't know if she'll come back. She does it all with dignity and calm, the telephoning, the packing, the leaving itself, and not until she's on the plane and night has fallen does the terrible thick guilt of it begin to squeeze her across the chest.

She lands at Shannon, takes the Galway bus, and gets out in the still early morning in Oranmore. A man happens to come up the footpath and sees her, and he says, "You'd be the Curtin girl, come back from America," and when she says, "Yes," he says, "Sorry for your trouble," so she knows, as she walks the last three miles, that she's too late, and she doesn't need the black ribbon on the door of the house to choke her with grief and regret, and she doesn't need Roísín's bitterness to make her feel the tug of the halter of shame at the nape of her neck, but she gets it anyway.

Roísín opens the door to her and turns back into the house without a word. It's left to Mrs. Joyce, who has come to help, to ask, "Would you see her?" So Mary steps unwelcomed and unembraced into the front room, still in her coat, and touches her mother's hand for the last time. She knows what her mother would say, what a load Roísín has

carried alone this past year. As she stands there in the cold, Mary accepts Roísín's bitterness as just, and bearable. She believes that before spring she'll be back in America; if the Cunninghams don't want to sponsor her again, Father Martin may find her someone else. Or she can get some kind of work here and save.

But when she leaves that room, meaning to put her suitcase in a corner and take up some task in preparation for the wake, her father has come in the house, and Roísín dries her hands to embrace her. "I was taken strange," Roísín says, "seeing you there so American in your coat. You're welcome, Mary," she says, "you're welcome home again. The tea is on."

Mary's mortally tired; she hasn't slept for thirty hours. She kisses her sister and turns to kiss her father, who stands beside the fire. "It's good you've come," he says, "with Roísín off in Galway City now."

"Off?" Mary says.

"Oh," Roísín says, with the breath of a laugh, "I didn't write it to you, but Michael Joyce and I are being married. In Christmas week."

Mary stares, Roísín grins, Da folds his arms and snorts. "Did you think you were away?" he says.

For just that one moment Mary believes they have killed her, but in the next moment she is simply lost, unhappy, and at home.

Right then, without a cup of tea or a bit of rest, she accepts their tribal, intimate revenge, begins her penance for the sins of abandonment, hope, desire.

She takes on her mother's work and then her sister's, and protects her heart with prayer and exhaustion. She doesn't recognize the slow creep of hopelessness, doesn't know she's sinking, settling into the suffocating bog of it, until Lyle's letter arrives in mid-January and she finds herself unable to breathe.

It's only a letter, and rather short, though she reads it a dozen times. He writes about the weather, which is bad in Boston this winter, and says he's being promoted at work. He doesn't mention that his mother has had a stroke and that he spends his evenings now, after the nurse has gone, trying to pretend she isn't drooling, trying to pretend he doesn't understand her demands for cigarettes he'll have to hold for her. He never does tell Mary about that first year, or the guilt that stains his relief when he finally puts his mother into a nursing home and lives alone but still not free of her in the apartment they shared for so long. In the same way, Mary never tells him about Da's growing strangeness—the way he has taken to shouting up the chimney and hiding food and sometimes staring at her as if he suspects her of something—or Roísín's small, breezy cruelties. She writes instead of the weather and farming in Oranmore; he tells her about Irish politics, and she tells him droll bits about Irish people; she wonders about movies, and he tells her she's missing little. After the first year she asks him

about world affairs, and he mentions his mother's illness; he writes vaguely of hoping to travel, and she mentions her sister's babies and her youngest brother's departure for work in England; she asks about his work, and he explains why buying a house is more sensible than renting. The courtship is odd and awkward, but it sustains their hearts through a long dark time.

And then one day in the third year, a week to the day after his mother's death, Lyle drives to a travel agency. His only idea is to be going somewhere, away from the empty apartment and the closet full of his mother's things, to be making arrangements, putting large and permanent things in motion and order. He writes a check; in four days he'll be on an airplane for Dublin, where he'll get a train to Galway and a bus to Oranmore. He figures he can take a taxi from there, or rent a bicycle, or walk if he has to. He doesn't question the propriety of paying an unannounced transatlantic call on a woman he has met only three times; he wants to see her, and she has always said yes, and he has nowhere else to go.

At the same moment—though it's late afternoon there on the small farm in County Galway—Mary is sitting on her bed dabbing a wet rag on the cut on her cheekbone Da's punch opened. She's panting, but not as badly as she was, and although she keeps a wary eye on her door, she isn't really afraid. Still, something will have to be done: she'll clean herself up and walk to Galway and speak with Roísín. She can't talk him past these sudden rages anymore, and with nobody left at home except her, he'll eventually knock down somebody who doesn't love him.

Five days later, as two elderly gardai lean smoking against their car with her suddenly cooperative father, Mary searches under his bed for the shoes he says he's got to have if he is to go with the lads to Saint Bridget's Hospital. She finds a plate of moldy potatoes, two copies of *Key of Heaven*, three knives, and a sock stuffed full of one- and five-pound notes. And the shoes. She runs to the car with the shoes, her heart pounding, and says, "Da," and he meets her eyes with his sly ones and winks. For an instant there in the thin sunshine he's the father of her best childhood mornings.

"Your mother made me them stockings," he says.

"Did she," she says.

"She did," he says, yawning. "Fine heavy stockings. I'm off, so," he says, and throws the cigarette away.

She watches the car down the yard, and she's crying, of course, but she'd hardly be human if some corner of her heart weren't preparing to wake into something new, if some corner of her mind weren't calculating how much money a sock could hold. So when she imagines that the fellow wobbling along the road now on a bicycle looks like Lyle Sullivan, she tells herself, *I'd not be human if I didn't think of him now*, but in penance for that humanity she stands a minute longer, waiting for him to pass by and prove her foolishness. ▀

INCIDENT REPORT

Alec Guinness and Edith Evans

.....

He was a bit-part actor when they met, barely come of age, and she, in his opinion, was the finest of her sex in the English-speaking world. In the role of the Apothecary, in a 1935 production of *Romeo and Juliet*, Alec Guinness watched the Nurse—the tall, imperious Edith Evans—nightly captivate her audience. From all indications she was heedless of his existence.

Before long, however, she was calling him by name, offering helpful tips and an occasional small compliment. Once, when he was sacked for butchering a role, Evans came to the theater to console him. "I believe in you," she told him. "In ten years' time ... you will be a good actor." She kissed him and drove off in her taxi. Soon she was inviting Guinness, along with Michael Redgrave, for weekends at her home in Kent; guests had to remember not to sit in her late husband's favorite chair. Because he adored her, Guinness found such deference easy.

But by 1940 a few rifts had occurred in the relationship. For one, Guinness had married despite Evans's displeasure. Then, too, he was obstinate about following a script to the letter, whereas she was open to subtle changes that made her own part more sympathetic. In the spring they rehearsed a drama called *Cousin Muriel*, co-starring Peggy Ashcroft. Evans, cast as a kleptomaniac housekeeper, could not accept that she was playing a thief. "She just likes pretty things," she explained. Guinness played her son, home from America and alarmed at the discovery of his mother's vice. When, as called for by the script, he spoke sharply to her during a rehearsal, Evans stiffened. "Do you intend saying that line the way you did?" she asked. Guinness replied in the affirmative—it was a play, for heaven's sake! But Evans could not reconcile this hostile son with the good, dear boy whose affection she had come to rely on. She let out a great wail—"Alec doesn't love me anymore! He doesn't love me! He *hates* me!"—and threw herself on the floor. Drumming her feet and sobbing, she seized the corner of the Persian rug and began to gnaw it. Guinness watched this performance from the sofa, rigid with horror, but Ashcroft responded at once. She flew from the wings, and in a moment of surpassing tenderness flung herself on top of her friend, holding her until the sobs subsided.

The war became a reality, and the play had a short run. Guinness vanished into the Royal Navy, and afterward into films. Their paths seldom crossed, but when Sir Alec did run into Dame Edith, the old affection welled up, unabated. —NANCY CALDWELL SOREL



PURSUIITS & RETREATS

TRAVEL

TALES OF THE ALHAMBRA

The lost Islamic world of southern Spain—and its modern echoes

BY CULLEN MURPHY

.....

It started out as a way to pass an idle moment, and quickly became a habit. Every afternoon during a recent visit to Granada, the onetime capital of the last Islamic emirate in Spain, I climbed the high, rugged spur that serves as a pediment for the Alhambra, the fabled palace of the sultans. There, in a terraced garden, I would sit for several hours and read. The time of year was late February, but the temperature was always in the high 60s or low 70s. Vernal lushness was a month away, but the boxwood and the sculpted evergreens proved amply fragrant.

To one side, a few hundred feet below, the tiled roofs of the city gave way to a plain stretching hazily westward. To the other the snowcapped peaks of the Sierra Nevada took on a mellow tint in the declining sun. And across a sharp defile, immediately ahead, rose the crenellated walls of the Alhambra, a delicate marble confection within a fortified shell, half a mile from end to end. The ancient Iberians once occupied this ground, and then the Romans and the Visigoths. The walls and towers look more or less the same as they did when Washington Irving took up residence in the Alhambra in 1829, a literary squatter who would go on to serve as the U.S. minister to Spain. For that matter, they look more or less the same as they did in 1492, when the conquest of Granada by King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile brought all of Spain under a unified Catholic monarchy, and put an end to nearly eight centuries of Islamic rule. In *Tales of the Alhambra*, a pastiche

of history and legend, Irving adopted an elegiac tone: "Such is the Alhambra—a Moslem pile in the midst of a Christian land, an Oriental palace amidst the Gothic edifices of the West, an elegant memento of a brave, intelligent, and graceful people who conquered, ruled and passed away."

I had become interested in Islamic Spain in the course of research for a book on the various inquisitions conducted by the Catholic Church over a span of many centuries—a subject bound up, to say the least, with the history of Muslims and Jews in Spain. My companion was my sixteen-year-old daughter, Anna, and our travels took us throughout Andalusia, a poor region of Spain and the one that held on longest to its Islamic character. Not surprisingly, Andalusia is also the center of modern Islamic stirrings in Spain—a phenomenon whose influence can only expand.

Muslim warriors from North Africa invaded the Iberian peninsula early in the eighth century A.D., scarcely a century after the emergence of Islam, a continent away. Within a few years Islamic forces had surged beyond Iberia and deep into France. Turned back by Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours, in 732, the Muslims retreated across the Pyrenees, firmly entrenching themselves in what is now Spain. In its golden age Islamic Spain was among the most civilized places on the planet—renowned for its scientists and philosophers, artists and architects, poets and musicians. In the matter of religion Islamic sultans generally tolerated and

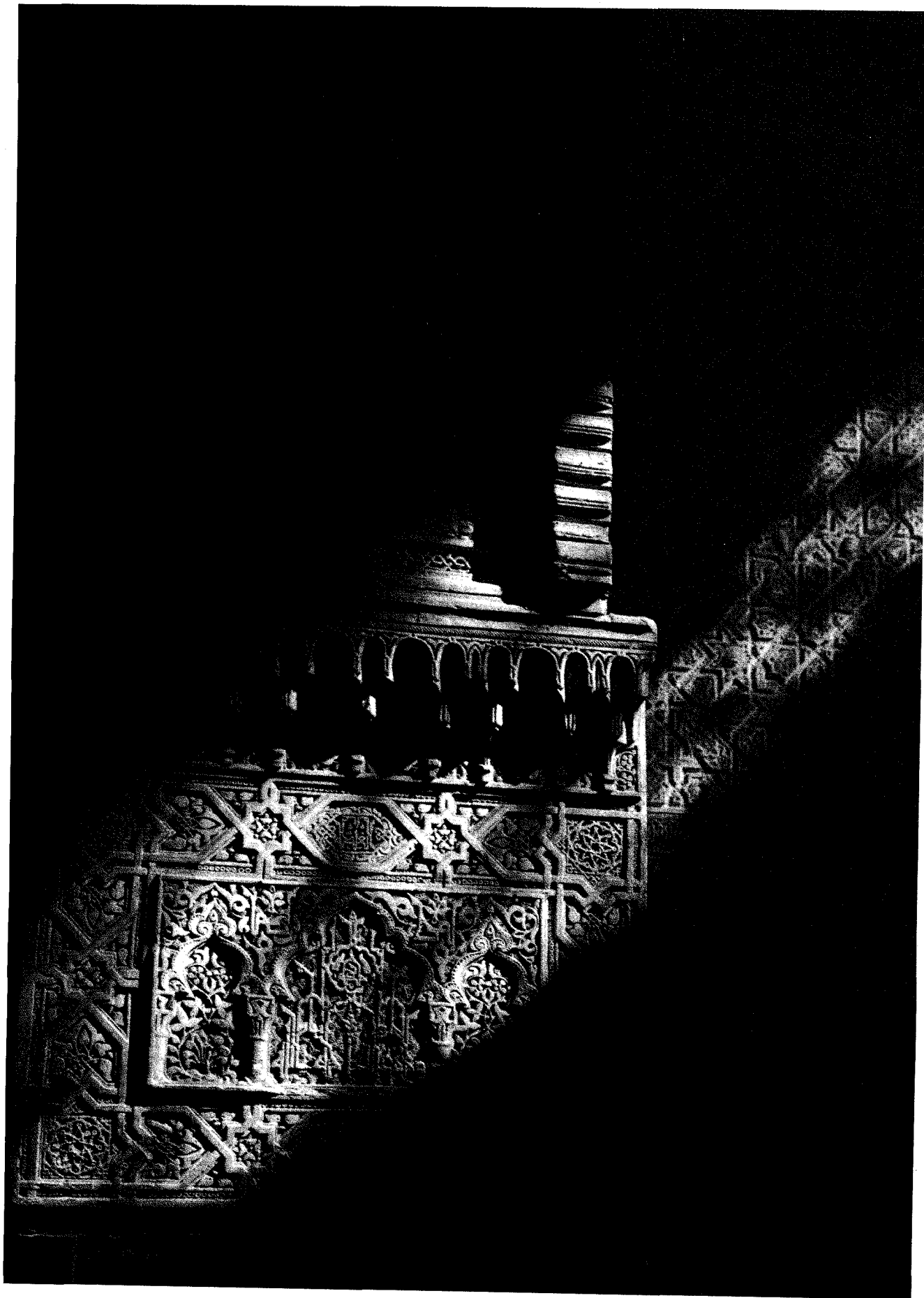
protected Jews and Christians, setting an example of *convivencia* that their Christian successors would conspicuously fail to emulate.

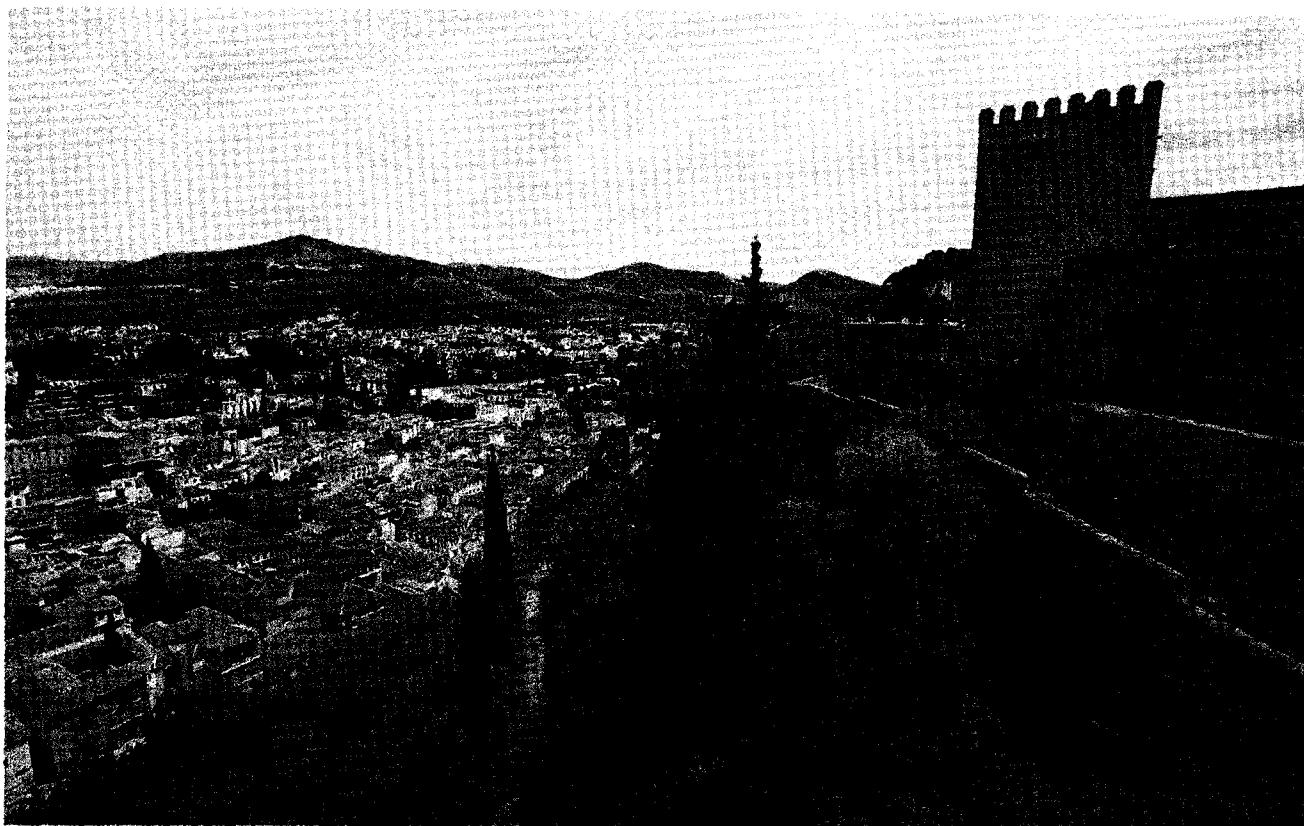
Islamic rule, though fragmented, extended over the bulk of Iberia for centuries, even as Christian warlords, pushing south, chipped away at Muslim territory. The work of the Reconquista, as it is called, came to an end with the fall of Granada. One of the immediate consequences was religious: first Jews and then Muslims faced the choice of conversion to Christianity or expulsion from Spain.

Granada today is a city of some 250,000, an appealing place in its own right and also a convenient base of operations for a wider excursion through formerly Islamic Spain. Córdoba, Spain's other great Islamic city, and once the largest and richest city in Europe, is about two hours to the northwest by car, along a route that winds among millions of olive trees. The Alpujarras, the remote stretch of hills and valleys given as a consolation fiefdom to the last Muslim ruler of Granada, lies about an hour to the southeast. The Pueblos Blancos—whitewashed towns, Arabic in origin and character, perched defiantly on crags—lie about two hours to the southwest.

Granada itself abuts the northwestern foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Ferdinand and Isabella are buried near the city's center, at the Capilla Real, in simple lead caskets surmounted by massive marble effigies. An inscription in Latin hails their zeal in the persecution of the infidel. A few blocks away a Moorish archway gives access to the courtyard of the Corral del Carbón, built in the fourteenth century as a caravansera, an inn for traveling merchants; today visitors needing maps and books can get them here. The proximity of the Sierra Nevada

In the Alhambra's Court of the Lions





The Alhambra looms over the old Muslim quarter of Granada, the Albaicín

has made Granada a center for winter sports in Europe, and the city is bidding to host the Winter Olympics in 2010.

The Olympics that Anna and I engaged in were more pedestrian. She had decided that within cities we should make our way only on foot, and she kept a log of miles walked. Our hotel was situated high on the slopes of Sabika, the hill on which the Alhambra was built, and early every morning we walked down a shaded path to Granada's main square, the Plaza Nueva, for breakfast. Hours later, in late afternoon, after roaming around the city, we hiked back up the hill.

Setting eyes on the Alhambra, one understands how the romantic Orientalism of the nineteenth century got its start. Moorish gateways breach the ruddy walls. Within the palace vaulted ceilings hang with plasterwork resembling starbursts of fine lace. Fountains play in the courtyards, and cool streams run in marble canals. In the Court of the Lions a gallery of lean columns preen in the glassy floor. The scale is not monumental but human—the most seductive form of grandeur.

The stone walls of the Hall of the

Ambassadors, three stories high, are intricately etched with passages from the Koran. Patterned wooden grilles cover the windows, dappling the interior. The atmosphere was not so peaceful half a millennium ago. In this chamber the hapless sultan Boabdil capitulated to Ferdinand and Isabella, who promptly moved into his palace. Here, a few months later, the monarchs told Christopher Columbus to go ahead with his voyage. And in this room Ferdinand and Isabella, goaded by the inquisitor Torquemada, signed the order to expel from Spain all Jews who would not convert to Christianity.

The Muslims who remained in Granada after Boabdil's retreat made their homes on a broad hillside across a valley from the Alhambra. This dense old Muslim quarter, known as the Albaicín, encourages wandering among its narrow lanes and terraced alleys. Along the crest of the ancient city wall, and on the grassy heights beyond are visible dozens of caves carved out by Gypsies. Anna and I had bought a detailed map of the Albaicín at the Corral del Carbón (it shows every house—indeed, every

tree), and from time to time we paused to plot a location or identify a structure. This house was once a Muslim hospital. That bell tower used to be a minaret. The church cloister over there was originally the patio of the main mosque.

The Rio Darro marks the lower edge of the Albaicín. We walked along it, upstream, as a road twisted through the narrow valley, past dwellings dug into the hillsides. In half an hour we were out of town and among farms. Anna did a calculation in her notebook and said, "That's mile fifty-three."

Today the red-and-yellow flag of Spain flies above the battlements at the prow of the Alhambra. It is joined by the flag of the European Union, with its circle of gold stars on a field of blue. Between them flies the flag of Andalusia, white and green, the green paying homage to the region's Islamic heritage. Andalusia's historical strata thrust into the present, plainly visible. As in the American Southwest, which resembles Andalusia in many ways, the strata are sometimes presented disingenuously. We once came across a street vendor selling T-shirts that

ROBERT FRECK/WOODFIN CAMP

displayed a cross, a Star of David, and an Islamic crescent side by side under the legend, in Spanish, THE SECRET IS THE MIXTURE. There was no hint of the treatment accorded two of those ingredients.

Spain's ancient Jewish heritage has of late received a measure of official emphasis, if only because outsiders come looking for it. The noncommercial part of Córdoba's old Jewish quarter, the Judería, with its twisting streets and hidden courtyards, is certainly an inviting part of town; a statue of Maimonides now graces a plaza on its edge, and the small fourteenth-century synagogue has been restored. But contemporary Jewish life is not prominent in Spain. There are only about 14,000 Jews in the country, and only about ten functioning synagogues.

Islam is a different story. Its architectural and linguistic legacies are inescapable, and Islam's small foothold in Spanish life has expanded, owing largely to Spain's economic boom. There are large Moroccan communities in Spain, and estimates of the Muslim population range from 300,000 to half a million; the growing immigration from North Africa, legal and illegal, is noticed with some alarm. Córdoba today is home to an Islamic university, not far from the Mezquita—the old Great Mosque, which was long ago converted into a Catholic cathedral. In Granada the neighborhood west of the Plaza Nueva has acquired a distinctly Islamic flavor, and a stroll among its shops and restaurants feels like a stroll through a souk. In the Albaicín construction is under way for a mosque—one of more than a hundred or so opened in Spain during the past decade.

Before going to Granada I spoke about Islam in Spain with the Islamic scholar Bernard Lewis, of Princeton, a sometime contributor to these pages. He told me that on his most recent visit he had attended an interfaith gathering in Córdoba, which the government had sponsored. Pronouncements on religious or social matters by imams in Spain are the subject of news reports and, occasionally, controversy. And of course, Lewis pointed out, many people in southern Spain number Mus-

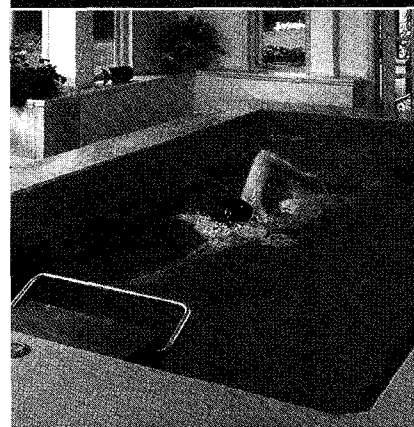
lims among their ancestors. "I have met Muslims in Spain who felt that southern Spain was old Muslim territory," Lewis said. "They see it as their duty to recover it—by conversion, not by conquest."

The only invasion that visitors to Granada need worry about is the invasion of the Alhambra by tourists. Tickets are limited to a certain substantial number each day, and indicate a time of entry. Fortunately, one can buy a ticket first thing in the morning, even before the Alhambra unlocks its gates, and designate whatever entry time one likes; once inside the precincts, visitors can stay for as long as they like. Traveling during the off season, as we did, is another way to ensure a serene experience. So is visiting at night: the Alhambra offers evening hours on various days of the week, which change seasonally.

I went alone one Saturday night (Anna was recovering from mile sixty-seven), and was the first one into the palace. The rooms were dimly lit, bringing salient features into subtle relief. Amazingly, there were no guards. In the Court of the Myrtles a shimmering pool reflected the plaster tracery and the starry sky. Echoing footsteps on the marble gave warning of the approach of other people. I made my way through the palace ahead of all of them, slowly and stealthily, finding momentary solace in the shadows of every next room. ■

Iberia offers four flights a day from Madrid to Granada; the trip takes about an hour, over mountains and olive groves. Granada is a university town and offers a range of amenities comparable to those of any modern city with a quarter of a million people. The Hotel Alhambra Palace, where we stayed, offers views of the nearby Alhambra from the upper floors of one side and panoramic views of Granada from the other (www.h-alhambrapalace.es). A lodging of equal quality but with a quieter mien is the Parador de San Francisco (www.parador.es), a converted convent that is actually inside the Alhambra's walls. For information about Granada and Córdoba consult www.andalucia.com or Spain's Board of Tourism (www.tourspain.es). Many good books are available about southern Spain, but a small volume that proved indispensable was the architectural guide Islamic Spain, by Godfrey Goodwin, whose intelligent commentary is enlivened by unexpected asides. Describing the horseshoe arch in the Alhambra's Gate of Justice, Goodwin observes, "Cut out of an Islamic tiled tympanum is a niche in which Ferdinand and Isabella placed a Virgin, in somewhat suburban taste."

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SUITABLY ATTIRE

*Well-dressed men have worn the same thing for a century now.
A history and an appreciation of the suit*

BY WILLIAM HAMILTON

.....

"It's hardest on the older guys," the well-tailored captain of an elegant New York restaurant known for the ego-mindful seating of its powerful clientele told me last spring. "They don't know what to wear, and when they try, they just don't look right. Look at Gerald Levin over there—he might as well be carrying a toolbox." Levin is the CEO who sent chills through haberdashery, in January of last year, when he wore khaki trousers and an open-necked shirt to the press conference announcing the merger of his company, Time Warner, with AOL. Levin has scarcely been seen in a necktie since.

Later in the season I stopped by a great Manhattan store to have a look around the men's-suits floor. It was nearly empty of customers, and the ranks of hanging suits brought to mind the terra-

cotta army guarding the Emperor's tomb near Xian. Would souls ever come to fill these silent human forms, or was this spectacle archaeological, an awesome and monumental reminder of a bygone age?

"About three months ago there was some concern," said an executive called in by a manager who had been called over by a clerk. "But the whole formal look is definitely coming back now." Evidently, the possibility that we were gazing at an obsolescent inventory made my question about how suits were selling too hot to handle for anyone less than a vice-president. When the executive left, the clerk called my attention to an entering customer, a man in shorts, a backpack, and a baseball cap. This apparent hiker or bird watcher picked up a sleeve to look at the tag. Before closing in on him as delicately as a fisherman stalking a trout, the clerk said, "It was those damn dot-coms that nearly killed us, but now that they've all crashed, we're going to be just fine again."

"We went casual in the nineties," the senior partner of a mighty New York law firm told me. "We had to compete with the dot-coms for the best and the brightest new talent, and not just with money. The dot-coms didn't wear suits. No ties. Comfortable cottons. They looked like a new way to do business. Some of my partners still wear suits. And you know who else does? The women. The young women lawyers all wear these black suits, with pants. I think it's so they won't be mistaken for secretaries. But none of the young guys wear suits anymore. I still wear a shirt and tie under my sweater. And I keep a blazer in my closet for important meetings."

Who would argue against the proposition that the twentieth century went farther, faster, than any before it? Yet despite the spectacular, transmogrifying effects of electricity

and telephones and rockets and nuclear energy and birth-control pills, men, at least in their most official capacities, wore nearly the same outfit the whole time. My grandfather, a member of Yale's class of 1896, kept a photo scrapbook of his college life. The haircuts, suits, ties, and shoes—even such accessories as suspenders, cuff links, fountain pens, and little wire eyeglasses—in these old snapshots indicate that a male time traveler from 1896 would not look very unusual on a present-day city sidewalk (except, of course, for his look of shocked amazement as he took in contemporary transportation, architecture, and women). But in 1896 a man of 1796, in a tricorne hat, powdered wig, knee breeches, buckled shoes, and frock coat, would have looked like someone on his way to a costume party.

The Roman toga and the mandarin robes of Imperial China covered correct officials for years too, but in comparatively static worlds that their wearers were trying to keep that way. The modern men's suit, with its pockets and sleeves and trouser legs and lapels and buttons, and flying that pennant of necktie, was devised and rigged for motion, like a sailboat. But it came from the turf, not the surf. That split in the back of the jacket was originally cut to drape over a saddle. The notched lapels can close the front as sleekly as a cavalryman's breastplate. Trousers, too, were probably first pulled on for horseback riding. The flying skirts of Alexander the Great's legions could cause riders not only sudden gusts of embarrassment but saddle sores.

When conquest became more administrative than heroic, the suit dismounted and gave orders from behind a desk. The outfit never looked smarter or more urban and organized than it did in the nineteenth century, standing against untailored backdrops of crumbling feudalism and spreading colonialism. In counterpoint to the ancient, often buttonless clothing on peasants and muzhiks and natives and slaves, suits were officers' uniforms of the New Authority.

Understandably, such a style of dress would come to the ruling classrooms of Yale in 1896—but what kept such caballero wear in vogue for yet another



ILLUSTRATIONS BY WILLIAM HAMILTON



hundred years? Jackets cut for saddles are cumbersome in cars. In our indoor, thermostat-steadied atmospheres the suit and tie can feel as monstrously clumsy as the old lead-footed, copper-domed suits in which deep-sea divers were lowered to the muddy bottom. In fine restaurants many chairs containing males are now hung with removed suit jackets. Pilots wear their jackets only in the airport, to look official and able and in charge (and reminiscent of the sea captains they have superseded). Like Clark Kent's boxy double-breasted suit, which had to be removed, in a phone booth or behind a tree, for Kent to function as Superman, ours have become more a transitory disguise than the clothes in which we actually do our work. Could the suit and tie, like the tuxedo, become an example of special-occasion wear? Maybe even a rental?

"Well, the suit per se has no utilitarian value," the senior law partner told me. "It once had a psychological value, but even then it had no actual function. With guys in shirts and jeans working their computers on Microsoft-style campuses, the appearance of a suit just means somebody from outside the hive has arrived—maybe a banker or a lawyer or a mortician. After you've sat in

a couple of meetings with billionaires wearing shorts—and drinking water from baby bottles the whole time, by the way—you wonder which is stranger: these new guys, or you in your suit and tie?"

The first suit came into focus as photography did. Freezing actual instants of light and shade, the camera took all the guessing, exaggeration, and rumor out of fashion news. There for all the boys to see on a magazine page was a photograph of Queen Victoria's heir, the Prince of Wales, off duty in reality, smoking a cigar in Paris, in trousers, a frontally buttoning jacket, and a necktie. So this is what a man who could buy anything wore when he wasn't in the ermine! Photography saw through the hundreds and thousands of formerly opaque miles and layers of class between his off-duty Royal Highness and the ambitious miners' and farmers' and grocers' sons who would change the world. It turned the robes of state into antiques reserved for parade wear. For the first time the everyday plumage of the unpecked apogee of the pecking order was available for popular study. Tailors clipped such pictures to show their clients, who obviously liked the idea of wearing what the Prince of Wales—

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and J. P. Morgan and Oscar Wilde and Caruso—did on the boulevards. Despite differences in quality, the suits on Kafka, in Prague, and Santos-Dumont, in Rio de Janeiro, and Toulouse-Lautrec, in Paris, were strikingly alike—and not that different from what Grandpa and his schoolmates wore in New Haven or, amazingly, what Big Business (Gerald Levin excepted) still wears, at least to shareholders' meetings. In the 1890s the suit and tie spread through haberdashery like Gutenberg's Bible through Christendom.

When it started, the new look had considerable advantages: it united all its wearers in a single anonymous, international, and interacting commercial urban class—modern man. Playing at being human, possibly giggling Japanese Emperors stuck their divine hands into their first experience of pockets as courtiers tied their neckties. Scottish kilties lost a familiar updraft off the floor. Turkish rug dealers found it more awkward to lounge on their goods smoking their hookahs in woolen stovepipe trousers than it had been in the old, voluminous Kublai Khan cavalry-style pants; but the advantages outweighed any possibly estranging unfamiliarity. The

suit offered every nineteenth-century man an identity beyond the tribe, the class, even the nation, of his birth. At least from a distance, the suit offered nineteenth-century man a new self.

Fashions, however, change—or anyway they used to. With sighs of relief, women climbed out of the Spanish galleons of nineteenth-century bustles and whalebone corsets into one new look after another. Men demurred. Perhaps because the suit and tie of 1896 were ahead of their time, and photographically promoted, and internationally significant, and as flattering as gift wrap on a wide variety of masculine figures, they stayed à la mode. Human males have a tendency to dress defensively. Unlike women, they dress not so much to look fabulous as to look acceptable. Even so, the old horseback-bred suit and tie should have had it by 1950: by then the future had become a vivid popular fantasy. Men seemed certain to appear eventually in sleek synthetic jumpsuits with magic belts they would use to teleport around the universe, taking an occasional pill to satisfy all their dietary needs. Futuristic tales of 1950 did not picture men of 2000 wearing more or less what Sherlock Holmes did.

What kept the suit in style was television. TV changed the visual world as powerfully and profoundly as photography had done before it. Everything on TV looked incredibly new and exciting, even Ed Sullivan in a suit. Little boys lying on the floor watching TV in 1950—and for the next fifty years—were imprinted with the male dress code seen on newscasters, hosts, quizmasters, sportscasters, evangelists, press secretaries, pundits, and even comedians: the coat and tie. For the aging suit, TV was Viagra. When anchormen moored by ties told viewers that Monica Lewinsky had given President Bill Clinton one so that she could see it around his neck when he next appeared on TV, we may have witnessed this totemic accessory's actual climax. Less than two years after this Pirandello / Marshall McLuhan / Danielle Steel moment of medium-message delivery, Gerald Levin, in the process of announcing that Time Warner had been sucked into cyberspace, made no necktie at all look even louder than Monica's notorious Ermenegildo Zegna.

Now it might seem that the eerily private and portable world facing us on our computer screens could drive dress back to loincloths, or at least bathing suits (though telecommuting may mean that you don't have to go out to work, you still have to answer the door). Bringing the world to you but not you to the world, cyberspace is not a dressy place.

But ceremony is a dressy place. Ceremony celebrates rank and order in public. A traditional hallmark of ceremony is the unrelaxed situation of the principals. We nobodies lining the parade route like to know that an uncomfortable effort is being made by those we watch; it's the price they should pay for being so much grander than the rest of us. Kings and Popes will tell you that neither the headgear nor the thrones are ergonomic. Standing at attention in uniforms in the Army, privates learn they must not twitch or slouch or scratch. Since they must ultimately be prepared to surrender even their lives to their institution, this first submission is a vital paradigm. Something referentially ancient and attractive and suitably irksome must be found for males to wear to the ceremonies indicating (and





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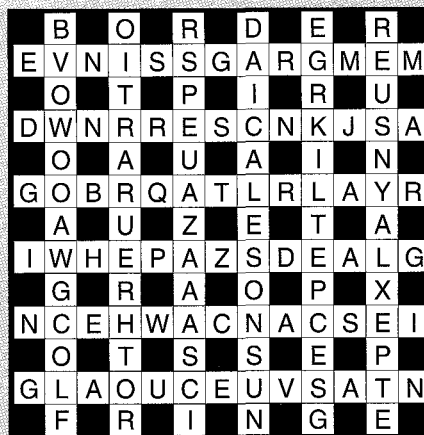
possibly thereby proving) the existence of organized civilization.

"I don't know—I just don't think we should go around here looking like pizza deliverymen," an annoyed forty-year-old investment banker told me, glaring at the door he'd just shut between us and the elegantly paneled lobby in which some of his colleagues wore golf shirts. "Goddamn it, I think we should look like somebody. Somebody in charge."

Menswear executives I interviewed all agreed that this fall will tell the tale. One said, "If the casual look was a trend, the suit will come back. But if this is evolution, it won't." A well-cut vice-president said, "This fall will be the one in which the suit and tie either make a big comeback or become extinct."

Can our great corporations continue half in suits and half in golf wear? How will the future mark off its officers from its enlisted men? Will casual funerals bury the dead in sweaters? Born with photography and regenerated by television, the relic of horsedrawn times may turn out to have been kicked upstairs by the new technology—the same way ermine and embroidered robes were by photography. The suit, if cryogenically preserved in cyberspace, may find a more democratic but equally ceremonial and possibly eternal life. ▀

ANSWERS TO THE JULY/AUGUST PUZZLER

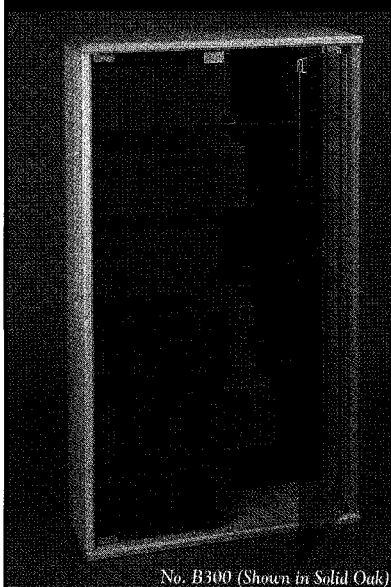


"Faces"

"I have seen better faces in my time."—King Lear

Top Face Words: 1-6. VI + SAGE 7-12. WRECKS (homophone) 13-18. ORALLY (homophone) 19-24. W + EASEL 25-30. CHANCE (homophone) 31-36. LOCUST (anag.) **Cube Words:** 1. B + OVINE 2. SCHINDO 3. GRAS(P)S 4. GR + AVID (*diva* rev.) 5. MER + GER 6. SUMMER (double def.) 7. WOO + DEN 8. ER + RAN + T 9. PRUNES (double def.) 10. CAB(IN)S 11. JERK + IN 12. J + AUNTS 13. BO + COT + A 14. BARQUE (homophone) 15. QUARTZ (homophone) 16. F + ALTER 17. L(ARIA)T 18. C(AN + A)RY 19. AWEIGH (anag.) 20. P + USHER 21. PI(A)ZZA 22. DO + ZEN'S 23. TAM + PE + D 24. GA(LAX)Y 25. CO + GENT 26. WRIT(H)E 27. M + A + CAWS 28. CAN(O)ES 29. SPACE + K 30. P(IX)IES 31. FLAG + ON 32. R(AGO)UT 33. SL(U)ICE 34. VENU(E)S 35. SAV(AG)E 36. PA + RENT

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POTATO SALAD

The German version is surprisingly light and intensely flavored

BY CORBY KUMMER

.....

I recently went to Lübeck, the northern-German city on the Baltic known as the home of Thomas Mann and marzipan, and, with less enthusiasm, as a home of herring. I was fulfilling a long-time desire to see herring, one of the world's most underappreciated fish, being caught and salted in a city whose fortunes were built on it nearly a thousand years ago. I was also after a definitive version of potato salad—"one of the great triumphs of traditional German cuisine," as Horst Scharfenberg says

mon to all the region's salads—comes as a revelation to people used to bland, mayonnaise-slathered salads that weigh down plates at barbecues. (It's a far safer picnic and buffet dish, too, given that warm mayonnaise is an ideal bacteria-growing environment.)

The seemingly inbred ability to make good potato salad may result from the German appreciation of many kinds of potatoes and how best to use them at different times of the year—appreciation and knowledge anyone can gain by visit-

Truly new potatoes, which usually appear at farm stands from mid-August through September, are delicate of flavor and fragile of skin. They haven't even formed their final skin, in fact, and the flaky, evanescent flaps rub off as you touch them (the test of a new potato); they should be rinsed gently rather than scrubbed. It's best to season new potatoes very lightly, to appreciate their fugitive flavor and just-getting-firm texture. The writer Barbara Kafka steams new potatoes over medium heat in a generous amount of butter in a heavy, closely covered pot (she uses enameled cast iron). She frequently shakes the pot to prevent the potatoes from sticking, and does not lift the lid to check for doneness until the potatoes have cooked for a full half hour, so as to keep



in *The Cuisines of Germany*, and a particular specialty of the restaurant-owning couple I visited, who, like most of their compatriots, seldom serve herring without potatoes.

I arrived in time to go out with the last herring expedition before local fishermen headed to colder waters for the summer. And I absorbed very useful salad-making tips from a woman descended from a line of professional women cooks. The surprisingly light and intensely flavored German potato salad—tangy from vinegar and subtly oniony, with the note of sweetness com-

ing farmers' markets now and in the next few months. Most of the heirloom potatoes that appear at farmers' markets are waxy, or low-starch, potatoes, quite different from big, thick-jacketed baking potatoes. Waxy potatoes are good for salads because they hold their shape when boiled, their high moisture content means a creamy texture, and they usually have better flavor than their mealy cousins. The newly popular fingerling potatoes, named for their shape (there are many varieties), are almost all low-starch potatoes, good for steaming, boiling, and roasting, and ideal for salad.

in the steam. A pot of these very lightly caramelized and intensely fragrant potatoes, just off the stove and uncovered at the table, can bring anyone back to the virtues of butter.

By late September to the beginning of November potatoes of all kinds have become their true selves, and are ready for salads and stronger seasonings. Most potato growers "cure" potatoes in dark, cool areas for several weeks before shipping them, so that they will withstand storage until the next season. Any potatoes from a local farmers' market will be superior to the long-stored ones

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARK GAGNON

from a supermarket, and the more dirt the better: industrial washing usually means potatoes from afar. If a farm in your area is selling heirloom varieties, look for Ozette, the best-tasting of the dozen or more fingerlings I've tried over the years; Ratte—also called Reine—are lovely too. Happily, a golden color usually means more than just a cosmetic suggestion of a buttery, rich flavor. (Color association also holds true with blue potatoes, this time negatively; people are generally averse to blue foods, associating them with mold or anomaly, and I've never found a blue or purple potato that tasted anything other than watery, bland, or musty.) Yukon Gold, not a fingerling but a medium-starch, general-purpose potato, is widely available year-round and is also a fine choice for salads. The small, round white- or red-skinned potatoes often mislabeled "new" are low-starch and will keep their shape nicely after boiling—although how much flavor they have depends on variety, distance from the farm, and length of time in the bushel basket.

"What's new and in season goes together," Lothar Tubbesing explained to me in the kitchen of the beautiful Baroque mansion in Lübeck where he and his wife, Heike, live and work. Heike was putting a pot of water on the stove—not for the potatoes, which she had already boiled and sliced, but for the dressing. The couple tries to serve only local seasonal produce at their restaurant, Lachswehr, on a site that has been occupied by an inn or a restaurant since 1188. The very tall, lean Lothar takes great pride in Lachswehr's history—and, indeed, in Lübeck's. Two of Germany's sprightliest odes to May were written in the garden behind Lachswehr, one of them set to music by Mozart, Lothar told me, breaking into song. When he showed me around the beautifully preserved medieval and Renaissance town center, which looks like the setting for a Vermeer, he seemed more like the mayor than a restaurateur. I wasn't surprised to learn that he and his wife would be catering a big birthday party for the real mayor the following day.

At Lachswehr I could see for myself

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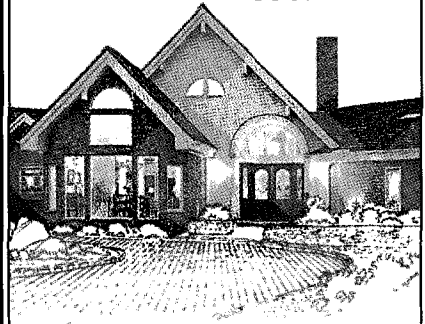
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the glories of spring out the kitchen window and on the counter in front of me, which was stacked with white asparagus from a nearby farm. White asparagus, lovingly shielded from the sun, is a local passion. This would be boiled, dressed with an orange hollandaise sauce, and served with steamed

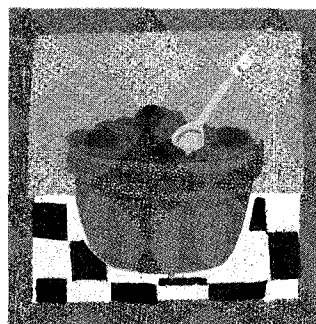
new potatoes. I tasted both vegetables, and could only conclude that white asparagus, even fresh out of the ground rather than out of a jar from a fancy-food shop, is an acquired passion. Although it was free of the salty, sour taste of

the jarred kind and had all the texture of green asparagus, it still had very little of the sweet, slightly pungent flavor I hope for from fresh asparagus. As for the new potatoes, they were yet more delicate than the ones I remembered from New England summers. I saw why the Tubbesings much prefer for salad the heartier flavor of the cellar-cured potatoes that Heike had boiled and sliced, a golden-fleshed, ovoid local variety called forelle ("trout"). Both husband and wife plucked slices from the bowl as we talked and Heike cooked, and I took their cue.

White asparagus and new potatoes would accompany "green" (fresh) herring of the kind that Lothar and I had watched being hauled up in nets at five o'clock the morning before, in the port of Travemünde, ten miles from Lübeck and once a world capital of herring fishery. Heike, as lean as her husband, grew up in Travemünde and learned local cuisine from her grandmother, who in her youth had worked in London as the cook for a German diplomat, and never cooked for fewer than ten. Naturally, herring, both fresh and salted, was a family staple, and whatever form it took, potatoes went with it. Today the main industry in Travemünde is tourism: the town is one of Germany's most popular seaside resorts. Few professional fishermen remain, but one who does agreed to take us out to the herring grounds.

I was enchanted by the titanium glint of the herring in the nets; each

section that the fisherman's teenage assistant unfurled into the small boat, with its irregular pattern of silver speckles gleaming against the dark Baltic Sea, looked like a celestial chart. The fishermen were less enchanted, Lothar explained. They wanted to see not occasional glints but solid silver.



Heike prepares green herring as everyone does—whole, lightly dredged in flour, and fried in a shallow pool of vegetable oil. I tasted green herring at a spring festival in the middle of Lübeck and enjoyed the deep, mackerel-like flavor, but I

remain convinced that herring comes into its glory when salted—as it was for centuries in the picturesque brick warehouses along the canal—and put into various sweet-and-sour sauces.

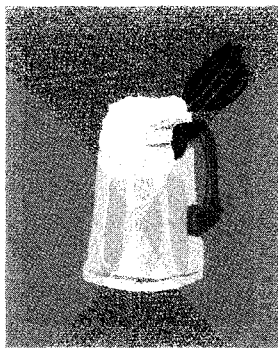
Inexplicably to me, it is difficult to persuade Americans of the succulent, not-that-salty greatness of salted herring. Russ & Daughters, one of New York City's only remaining "appetizing stores," specializes in herring and will ship any of its many kinds, in or out of sauce; the phone number is 800-787-7229. The friendly man who answered the phone was happy to give me a short herring course, and when I asked his advice on what to order, he said, "The way I had it twenty minutes ago—pickled herring in sour-cream sauce with beets and apples. And a nice glass of beer."

Dress potatoes while they're still warm, I've always been told, if you want them to absorb maximal flavor. The rule is sacred to many Germans, who view potato salad practically as a national symbol. I was surprised, then, that Heike had already cooled and sliced her potatoes. She had done this, she said, to allow for uniform slices, which are nearly impossible to achieve with even the waxiest potato before it has cooled. A warm dressing will compensate for cool potatoes, she said, and I later confirmed her advice by dressing both warm and cooled potatoes and tasting them after several hours. Heat will also dissolve salt and sugar

and begin to emulsify the oil in the dressing, providing a smoother consistency. (Classic boiled dressing includes egg, which fully emulsifies vinegar and water to make a "salad cream.")

I learned some tricks for successful boiling from *One Potato, Two Potato*, a handsome new book by the able editors and writers Roy Finamore and Molly Stevens. Start with cold water, generously salted, and simmer potatoes partly covered for longer than you might think—a full thirty to thirty-five minutes even for small whole potatoes. Test with a skewer, which will disfigure potatoes far less than the usual fork or paring knife; the skewer should pass with ease through the entire potato. Spoon the potatoes onto a baking rack set over the sink, to avoid both the usual breakage when you dump them into a colander and the oversteaming of those on the bottom if you leave them there to cool. Let them cool thoroughly on the rack or on a tea towel. Then you can slice them with confidence to the thickness you like, and toss them in dressing with much less crumbling.

I adapted Heike's recipe to suit about three pounds of potatoes (I used roughly a dozen medium Yukon Gold), which will yield about five cups of slices. Wash and boil the potatoes. While they cool, prepare the dressing by bringing to a simmer one and a half cups of water, a quarter cup of white-wine vinegar, and three tablespoons of mild-flavored olive or vegetable oil; stir in one tablespoon of sugar, two teaspoons of kosher salt or one and a half teaspoons of finely ground sea salt, and half a teaspoon of white pepper, preferably freshly ground.



Let the mixture boil for a minute or so, to begin to emulsify the oil, and then add half a cup of minced white onion. Return the mixture to a simmer and then remove from the heat—the onion should not cook through, but the brief heating will lessen its bite. Toss the hot dressing with the potato slices. Cover and let stand for at least six hours and preferably overnight. If the weather is cool, leave

the bowl out, and if not, refrigerate it and bring the salad to room temperature before serving. Toss it with two tablespoons of chopped parsley at the last minute.

I'd asked Heike to show me the sort of potato salad she could make in her sleep, the kind every German cook knows. Like all such recipes, this one is open to infinite variations. The commonest are substituting chicken or meat broth for the water in the dressing, adding mustard, diced cooked bacon, or chopped pickles to the dressing after it comes off the stove, and tossing snipped chives or chopped fresh dill into the finished salad. Any one of these can provoke a debate of the sort I innocently instigated when I took a preliminary batch of my salad for the judgment of Hildegard Lebow and Margot Lebach, twin grandmothers who grew up in Sobernheim, in central Germany, and now live in Andover and North Andover, Massachusetts. The two women had watched their mother prepare salads nearly identical to the one I saw being made in Lübeck, but their opinions now diverge sharply on such matters as whether or not to heat the vinegar and whether it should be red or white; the wisdom of adding mustard when two of its chief flavor components, vinegar and salt, are already present in abundance; and

white versus black pepper (most Germans prefer white vinegar and white pepper). They did, however, take time out from a family gathering to tell me how to correct the seasoning in my salad, and the quantities above reflect their joint advice.

Each of the twins is justly renowned for her potato salad, and each asked (insisted, actually) that I taste hers from the buffet they had prepared. Margot scrutinized my face as I chewed; Hildegard waited avidly at my other elbow for me to take a forkful from her side of my plate. Margot knew already how she could definitively trump her sister: "Next time," she cried, "I make herring!"

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BOOKS & CRITICS

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THE COUNTRY AND THE CITY

With her inclusion in The Library of America, the neglected novelist Dawn Powell has finally achieved literary canonization. Our critic assesses the contrasting worlds of Powell's fiction

BY PHILIP HENSHER

.....

In the course of her immortal essay "The Short Story, Through a Couple of the Ages," Dorothy Parker demolished half a dozen popular genres with some brilliantly funny imaginary first lines. Along with stories beginning "Ho, Felipe, my horse, and pronto!" Parker admitted, she "was always unable to do anything" with the sort of story that begins "Everyone in Our Village loved to go by Granny Wilkins' cottage ..."

Dawn Powell is customarily compared to Dorothy Parker. Diana Trilling said that Powell was the "answer to the old question 'Who really makes the jokes that Dorothy Parker gets the credit for?'" This comparison has turned into an automatic response on the rare occasions that Powell's name comes up. But anyone who reads Powell from beginning to end will find an inexplicably strange oeuvre—as if Parker had from time to time actually retreated from the highballs and the wisecracks and the Algonquin Hotel and written half a dozen novels in the purest Granny Wilkins vein.

Powell's novels fall into two groups so utterly unlike that it is hard to believe the books were written by the same person. In the fifteen novels she wrote from 1922 to 1962, two worlds, two entirely different ways of thinking and feeling, emerge. She is more celebrated, perhaps, for her New

York novels: elaborately plotted, cynical comedies of bohemian life such as *Turn, Magic Wheel* (1936); *The Happy Island* (1938); and *Angels on Toast*

(1940). They are exquisitely judged and timed celebrations of intoxication and poison, in which malice, ruthless ambition, or a fascinatingly odd sexual preference has a tendency

to creep out after one late-night bourbon too many. Her drunk scenes (and it is tempting, in recollection, to think that the New York novels consist of almost nothing but drunk scenes) look like dispatches from a time between Prohibition and Jane Fonda, when America was not puritan, when excess could be celebrated, when intoxication was funny.

Many of the New York wits of the 1930s and 1940s retained some kind of tie to their provincial origins, and even Dorothy Parker wrote tales of pre-war respectability. But none pursued the genre of provincial longing with such earnestness as Dawn Powell, and to her blissful screwball comedies ("highball comedies" might be an apter term) one must add a series of sad Ohio pastorals of loneliness and innocence: *The Bride's House* (1929), *Dance Night* (1930), *Come Back to Sorrento* (1932). Some ingenuity is required to connect the two strands in Powell's work: occasionally an innocent, newly arrived in New York,

evokes his provincial origins; sometimes a small-town aesthete will confess to longing for a great metropolis. It is not surprising that many of Powell's greatest admirers have resorted to writing off one group or the other of her novels and basing their admiration on only half of her work. It is said that pianists fall into one of two categories: those who can play the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata op. 111 and those who can play the second. Dawn Powell's readers, on the whole, can read either this sort of thing:

Now the evening fast train roared through Lamptown, its triumphant whistle soared over the factory siren, in its vanishing echoes the beginning of a song trembled, a song that belonged to far-off and tomorrow. Yes, yes, he would come away, Morry's heart answered, now he was ready.

Or this:

"Whatever mischief we got into this summer let's never do it again," he begged. "Did I tell you you never looked lovelier?"

It was a lie. Prudence's looks, he reflected with some surprise, were quite gone. She really looked as hard as nails, but then so did most women eventually.

Thus end *Dance Night* and *The Happy Island*, respectively. In a confrontation between sincerity and cynicism, the more disabused, experienced voice tends to win. How could a writer who sees through so much also be so earnest? How could Powell on the one hand so comprehensively rubbish the pretensions and delusions of romantic infatuation and nostalgia and on the other mount an unfailingly sympathetic exploration of longing and regret? The reader is faced, it sometimes seems, with two alternatives: to conclude that the Ohio novels were written with an entirely cynical pretense of sincerity,



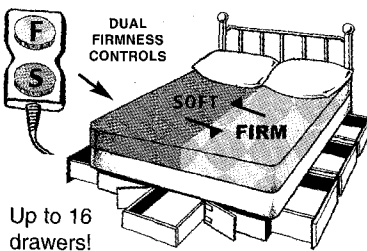
Her father was a shiftless operator who wandered the country selling anything from coffins to colognes. Her mother died when Dawn was seven; her father's second wife, a deeply unpleasant woman, abused Dawn and her two sisters. When, in 1910, she burned some of Dawn's notebooks, Dawn ran off to live with a sympathetic aunt, who allowed her to complete her education. In 1918 she moved to New York, where she got by as a typist and on freelance writing for magazines and (in the first episode in a long, problematic relationship with the film industry) by appearing as an extra in a movie called *Footlights and Shadows*. She married Joseph Cousha in 1920; the marriage proved shaky—both of them were given to adultery both casual and serious—but never quite broke down. In 1925 she published her first novel, *Whither*, which is never read now. Subsequent novels—*She Walks in Beauty* (1928), *The Bride's House*, *Dance Night*, and *Come Back to Sorrento*—are provincial romances; not until 1930 did she begin the first of a series of New York novels, *Turn*, *Magic Wheel*. After that *My Home Is Far Away* was her only return to the Ohio setting, and it is significantly different in tone from the novels of the first group. Her husband died—and her final novel, *The Golden Spur*, was published—in 1962; Powell died in 1965. For most of her life she had lived at the center of American literary affairs (though she never attained more than modest acclaim), and her diaries, published posthumously, proved to be a splendidly entertaining and scandalous source of gossip. Tim Page, who edited the diaries and has been stalwart in promoting Powell's superlatively cunning novels, wrote a fine biography (1998); that Powell has now risen to the eminence of The Library of America is owing almost entirely to his enthusiastic labors.

or to think that the New York novels, despite a brave show of hard-bitten wisecracking, are the work of a secret sentimentalist—as if Louisa May Alcott had put on a pinstripe suit and taken to cigars, drink, and adulterous relationships with cocktail pianists. Neither choice is entirely satisfactory—the beauty of the Ohio novels cannot be denied; the vicious intensity of the New York work is a performance but not an act. No, Powell must simply be read; she is contradictory but never

incoherent, and if no label quite fits (the pre-war Anne Tyler? the American Anthony Powell? the literary Howard Hawks?), it is as well to reflect that not many good writers can be reduced to such formulas, and when a novelist is conspicuously too rich to be summed up in four words, that may be an inconvenience but it is not a demerit.

Powell was born in Mt. Gilead, Ohio, in 1896. The story of her early life, minimally embellished, can be found in her 1944 novel *My Home Is Far Away*.

If you can't say anything good about someone," Alice Roosevelt once said, "sit right here by me." It is hard to think of anything as relentlessly unforgiving as Powell's New York novels; even Swift had his Houyhnhnms. Powell's New York has the moral atmosphere of *The*



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Alchemist—human beings are divided into fools and knaves. Take the brilliantly funny scene early in *The Happy Island* (a novel mysteriously omitted from this collection), in which two women, mistresses of the same man, slide into helpless intimacy.

Jean powdered her nose. It was a fine large Roman nose and the midget puff from her quarter-size vanity seemed singularly inadequate.

"Prudence, you're wonderful," she said. "I couldn't be the way you are. I'd be terribly mad and jealous in your shoes but then I'm just plain female, and you're so modern and so clever. You are, Prudence, really, you're wonderful."

"Oh, come now," Prudence said with a graceful laugh. "You drink up your lunch there and see if you don't feel better."

Jean's nose wrinkled up ominously. "You never cry, do you, Prudence?" she sighed. "I guess I'm just spineless."

"Now, Jean. Don't say that."

"It's true. I'm weak," she insisted, tears welling again in her lovely blue eyes. "I haven't the least resistance. I've always been that way. My own mother used to tell me so. 'Jeanie,' she'd say—I had a little green winter outfit, green broadcloth with bands of ermine and an ermine pompon on the bonnet; she sent to Paris for every stitch she put on me, particularly after Papa ran off with the telephone operator in Hyannis so we had to show a lot of swank just to make people forget, you know how summer Colonies are. And Mama never would use the telephone again! Literally! She even sent telegrams to people in the next house rather than touch the telephone. And then sending to Paris for my clothes, wasn't she foolish?"

Paris or Sears Roebuck, reflected Prudence, who cared?

It is difficult to see how the narrative could insult Jean more comprehensively, or find more-unpredictable ways to skewer her. The practiced reader of Powell will wince in particular at the unkind emphasis of "lovely blue eyes"; she is a writer, like George Eliot, in whose novels feminine pulchritude gets what it deserves. The disdainful epithet "pretty," accompanying Amanda Keeler's appearance in *A Time to Be Born* (1942), is like a knife going in. But Prudence, who has put herself in a

deeply undignified position, is as much the subject of cold analysis as Jean; hers is an affectation of disenchantment, and not the real thing.

Eventually Powell began to observe sentiment and not to express it. Hence, I think, her strong interest in homosexuality, which she never described with the attendant plea-bargaining of the liberal novelists of the period. Powell saw the danger inherent in writing about a heterosexual passion—the majority of her readers might slide into sympathy, overlooking the carefully established forensic tone. A homosexual passion, on the other hand, was a perfect subject for detached analysis. Decker's loneliness in the lovely, melancholy *Come Back to Sorrento* is elaborately explored, but the possibilities for empathy are always scrupulously limited; and the homosexuals of the New York novels—"He could see that Van had worn out his brief popularity, for young Mr. Willy was openly sneering at his shoes"—are always objects, their shrill arias of reproach richly orchestrated. They are thoroughly understood by someone who finds them interesting, but portrayed in a way calculated to make the reader not care deeply about them. Caring is always optional in Powell's New York books; she would rather interest a reader than make him weep.

Detachment yields the grandest results in *My Home Is Far Away*, Powell's return to the Ohio setting and in many ways her best book. It is a beautiful marriage of naive sentiment and worldly cynicism; despite its bluntly autobiographical nature, it explores alienation from feeling rather than feeling itself. Here, however, the exiles from conventional emotion are not clever Manhattanites but, with superb plausibility, children. The whole book is in a child's voice; the style becomes more complex as the children grow up, and it feels as truthful a piece of ventriloquism as the first chapters of *David Copperfield*. Children cannot be relied on to exhibit or feel the proper adult emotions, or to make the proper adult judgments. Marcia and her sister react with delight to the

chaotic ménage of their rural aunt and uncle, whose idea of a respectable night in is a pie-eating race.

Uncle Louie always won because Aunt Betts got out of breath from laughing and had to unloose her belt, even her collar. One night they finished the cider barrel between them, drinking from the bung, and they must have had a race on the pantry too, for the fried squirrels and corn pudding were all gone by morning.

Most of the adults have learned to disapprove of such unrestrained pleasures, and know to cry at funerals; children do not, and their emotions are stranger, and truer.

The worst thing for Marcia about [her mother's] funeral was having to sit on Aunt Lizzie's slippery lap (it had no shelf at all) and seeing grown-up people cry. Now she had feelings, Marcia thought, when the quartette of Papa's brother Masons sang "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep," but it made her angry to have feelings and lose the strange sense of sorrow. She didn't like to see her father crying on Aunt Lois' shoulder, either, because feelings seemed to have made him forget that he didn't like Aunt Lois one bit.

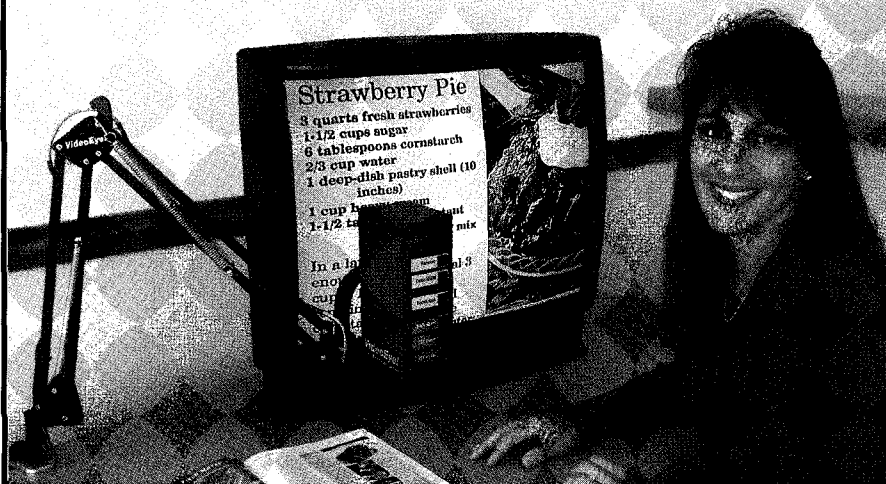
The death of the heart appealed to Powell; she sometimes seems to have trembled on the verge of saying or implying that it might not be so very bad a thing to be free of desire or need. In some of her novels the dead heart belongs to an unfeeling child or a New York drunk; sometimes, as in the magnificent figure of the stepmother in *My Home Is Far Away* (a domestic tyrant Ivy Compton-Burnett might have envied), it comes from hypocrisy. "This was no time to cry over one broken heart," one of her novels begins. What the appropriate time would be Powell never revealed; she had more-important things to think about.

And what she distrusted most was articulate public emotion. *A Time to Be Born* is an astoundingly uncharitable portrayal of Clare Boothe Luce, under the name of Amanda Keeler.

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to spring up by the dozen, level-eyed handsome young women with nothing to lose, least of all a heart, so there they were holding it aloft with spotlights playing on it from all corners of the world, a beautiful heart bleeding for war and woe at tremendous financial advantage.

Emotional confessions are just as deplorable: even poor, silly Marian Callingham, in *Turn, Magic Wheel*, dying of cancer and telling her husband's first wife all her secrets, can't quite bring out the author's sympathy. Rage, on the whole, is best: "Detestable Baby! Hateful Olive! Horrid House! Raw searing rage seethed through him ..." What true feelings there are in these books are locked up—like the manuscript of Dennis Orphen's novel in *The Wicked Pavilion* (1954), firmly sealed in the safe of a café.

One feels that for Powell the secrecy surrounding feelings was a source of energy. There is a suggestive conflation of secrecy and strength in *The Locusts Have No King* (1948).

Wherever he went that night people insisted on confiding in him. Perhaps some fear of his fellow-men gleamed in the young man's intense blue eyes that made them want to reassure him that they, too, were unarmed. Perhaps his eager haste suggested a mission of love, so circumstance must conspire mischievously with people to delay him.

It began when he stepped confidently into a taxi ...

The argument is explicit, but there is a half-conscious echo, too, between "confiding" and "confidently"; the distant etymological cousins become near cognates in Powell's work. From the possession of confidences flows confidence: the person confided in, the holder of a secret, gains strength. And that extends, one feels, to the novels, whose most powerful secrets are withheld from even the most sympathetic reader. Powell's diaries, strikingly, confide almost nothing to the page; she wrote very little about what must have been the most traumatic episodes of her life, and preferred not to share her innermost thoughts. Similarly, the novels, which are full of half-expressed anxieties about how a woman may speak and a

half-expressed, anxious desire to speak out, find a sort of solution in the stylish verbal carapace of the wisecrack, the consolation of not feeling, the supreme satisfaction of deploring the emotionally incontinent.

These are funny, smart books; their distrust of the naive wish to be explicit propels them into a rewarding vein of aesthetically rich implication and suggestion and emotional ambiguity; and behind it all, one slowly comes to feel, is the pain that started when Powell's stepmother found her frank youthful notebooks and burned them. Thereafter Powell would lock her feelings in the safe of a café; she wanted to be successful, but on some level in these books is a strong desire not to be loved. The novels are full of female voices choked and unheard; Connie, in *Come Back to Sorrento*, "might have gone into grand opera, perhaps," but is exiled to the Chekhovian province of Ohio; nearly the first thing Jen, in *Dance Night*, says is "I've got to talk to somebody, haven't I?" And Powell choked her own voice: brilliant as they are, her novels pursue a manner that might have been calculated to deter nine out of ten readers.

The easiest and most commonplace way to mask oneself is, of course, to get very drunk, and one of the most astonishing things about Powell's novels is their unprecedented, fabulous crapulence. The scale of the drinking in any of the New York novels defies belief; they are as liquid in the memory as an Esther Williams movie. *Angels on Toast* begins with Lou and Jay drinking in a train compartment; after meeting with Judge Harrod ("I seldom drink in the afternoon, hmm,"), they go to the club car for another drink, and so on into the night before meeting up in the morning for an "eye-opener." The second Lou arrives in New York, "they stopped in the New Yorker for a quick shot to brace their nerves." Later, Lou calls in at Ebie's apartment ("They had a few highballs and by the time they got out of the apartment it was too late to take in a show ..."). They go out and come back ("We drank a whole bottle of Hennessy after we

got back here, you know"). The next day Lou calls Jay over to the Waldorf to discuss business over cocktails. By page twenty-five of *Angels on Toast* the reader is open-mouthed with incredulity; fifty pages later he is practically ready to sign the Pledge—and all this heroic behavior continues, unabated, to the end.

Sadly, years of public-health announcements have probably done in that great staple of comic invention, the drunk scene. I once presented a class of serious-minded creative-writing students with the scene in Randall Jarrell's *Pictures From an Institution* in which Gertrude drinks an enormous glass of Jack Daniel's "in three swallows" before trying to talk ("At first it was hard for her to pronounce some of the words"). I was startled to find that most of them thought it was intended to excite sympathy for Gertrude; not one of them recognized it as comic in intention. Powell's drunk scenes would survive even if no one thought they were funny, because underneath them is a terrible truth about her characters: like her, they would always rather talk from behind a mask than not at all. In a sense the poignancy and cruelty of that encounter between Prudence and Jean in *The Happy Island* is disguised by its brilliant hilarity. Take that away, and what is left is what was always there: the bleak sight of two women unable to talk, most halting when they believe themselves to be at their most open.

Powell is a supremely deserving candidate for admission to The Library of America, a writer of consistent and startling pleasure, cruelty, and ingenuity. Next to her the celebrated wits of the Algonquin look self-conscious and willful, their exercises in pathos whiny and thin. Powell's hardness was genuine, and the pain beneath it profoundly troubling. She will, perhaps, never be a general taste; a publisher once told me that the two adjectives that will automatically reduce sales if used on a dust jacket are "clever" and "elegant"—which pretty well does for Powell, who was never anything else. Despite her expressed wish for a grand success, something in her did not want to be

loved or even, perhaps, much read. If ever she aspired to write—in the words of Randall Jarrell—“a plot that would bear up under the weight of hundreds of thousands of readers, a plot that higher critics could call crude and that bewitched families could pad over in house-slippers,” she had abandoned that ambition by the time she wrote the first of her New York novels.

But Powell belongs on the shelf with the masters of the novel—with those, like Ivy Compton-Burnett and Henry Green, whom every serious novelist must and will read. And her influence shows in a series of brilliant pupils. The unique balance between rapture and heroic, abusive metaphor in Randall Jarrell's *Pictures From an Institution*, one of the greatest American novels of the twentieth century, was made possible by *The Happy Island*; the stupendous, concrete satires of William Gaddis are Powell on a cosmic scale; and sometimes, as in the following passage by Lorrie Moore (from the short story “Agnes of Iowa”), who is, I think, the best of living American writers, there is something that can only be an homage to Powell's beautiful, profound, largely unread body of work.

“Where am I from?” Agnes said it softly. “Iowa.” She had a tendency not to speak up.

“Where?” The woman scowled, bewildered.

“Iowa,” Agnes repeated loudly.

The woman in black touched Agnes's wrist and leaned in confidentially. She moved her mouth in a concerned and exaggerated way, like a facial exercise. “No, dear,” she said. “Here we say *O-hi-o*.”

The veneration and study of those novelists who revere Powell will be enough to ensure a permanent place for her; an age, like ours, that has lost the taste for satire, that cannot see why getting drunk could ever be funny, that is shocked (my creative-writing class again) by *The Dunciad*, may not find these glittering exercises in causing offense entirely to its taste, but they will never prove less than salutary. And I cannot imagine a reasonable reader who does not from time to time prefer a novelist who would rather twist your wrist than feel your pain. **A**

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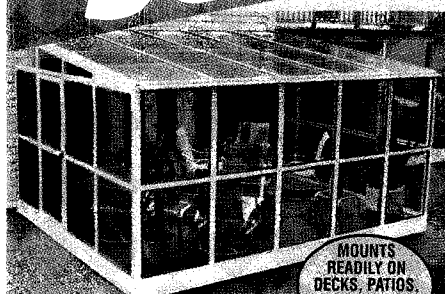
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NEW & NOTEWORTHY

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Since *The Twenty-Seventh City*, Jonathan Franzen's amazing debut way back in 1988, American fiction has seen a host of smart-guy writers, some of whom have garnered that dubious laurel, literary celebrity. Franzen, who may be the most rewarding of the lot, last surfaced in 1992, with *Strong Motion*, another daring performance, but since then he has published only essays and excerpts, whetting readers' appetites for this, his long-awaited third novel.

The Corrections follows the tribulations of the Lambert family, from the stolid midwestern city of St. Jude. The children have long since grown and fled to the hipper East Coast, leaving Enid to tend Alfred, whose health, like their relationship, is declining precipitately. Enid's dream is to have one last perfect Christmas together as a family—after she and Alfred take their dream cruise. The action opens with a stop in Manhattan to see Chip, their middle child, an ex-professor dropped by his college after a humiliating affair with a student. Pushing forty, Chip has never lost the attitude of the too cool grad student whose view of the world comes from the French poststructuralists. He has pinned his hopes to a screenplay that is nothing more than a thinly veiled version of his own downfall. He's an unmitigated failure, dead broke, yet he retains—through a combination of denial and pride—a desperate, last-ditch optimism. As his parents arrive, his girlfriend is in the process of leaving him, delivering her long-suppressed opinion that his screenplay, just sent to his producer, is flat-out bad. Chip understands that she's right and heads off to rescue his screenplay before it's too late, frantically coming up with the corrections that will save it.

Despite a complex and involved plot,



THE
CORRECTIONS

by Jonathan
Franzen

Farrar, Straus and
Giroux, 576 pages,
\$25.00

the driving force of the book is that simplest, most intricate of engines, the unhappy family. Deep down these are insecure people, often miserable (sometimes buoyed, it must be said, only by the author's virtuosity and humor), and much of the drama springs from what they feel they need to hide from one another. Some of the guiltiest laughs come when these secrets are revealed in worst-case confrontations or loopy coincidences.

Franzen's dialogue between family members contains a barely restrained violence, comfortable chat suddenly turning barbed. In straight narration his powers of language are astonishing. Here's Alfred trying to lower himself onto a chaise longue in Chip's apartment: "He'd realized only recently that at the center of the act of sitting down was a loss of control, a blind backwards free fall. His excellent blue chair in St. Jude was like a first baseman's glove that gently gathered in whatever body was flung its way, at whatever glancing angle, with whatever violence; it had big helpful ursine arms to support him while he performed the crucial blind pivot."

As the Lamberts go their own ways (and they do, if only to escape one another), Franzen casts a wide net, pulling in the principles of metallurgy, quotations from Schopenhauer, railroading, the rivalry between Sweden and Norway, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the short-lived rock band Mission of Burma—a whole goofy stew. But as in any great satire of attitudes, the frozen component parts of the book don't convey the power of the living whole. Franzen is a wizard, endlessly inventive in his thematic connections and scene setting. He can run riffs on Lacan or the post-Cold War instability of the Baltic states, yet isn't above the pleasures of slapstick and low jokes (the names of some supporting characters are Pynchonesque bon-bons: Fenton Creel, Dale Driblett, Eden Procuero). *The Corrections* is a wide-open performance showcasing the full range of his skills and his eclectic intelligence.

Because of the book's preoccupation with the individual caught in complex social and political systems, comparisons with Don DeLillo's *White Noise* are unavoidable, and perhaps also with William Gaddis's work or with Evan Connell's *Mr. Bridge* and *Mrs. Bridge* in their more domestic moments. But ultimately *The Corrections*, with its emphasis on sibling rivalry, the break between generations, and the clash between pious bourgeois respectability and the slippery mores of this new and alien America, recalls no novel so much as John Cheever's *The Wapshot Scandal*. *The Corrections* is just as funny and sad and smart as that masterpiece, and Franzen, like Cheever, reminds us of the timelessness of human folly. —STEWART O'NAN

Modern primatology could be regarded as the scientific offspring of one man's sex drive. Beginning in 1954, Carole Jahme writes, the paleontologist Louis Leakey began recruiting unproven young women for field research under his sponsorship, in part because he believed in their innate ability to observe primates in nature without fatigue or prejudice and in part because he wanted to seduce them. Jane Goodall, his first famous "ape lady," was so "appalled" by his romantic overtures in 1958 that Leakey, crestfallen, turned to her mother, and pursued a lasting affair with her instead. As grossly insensitive as he was lascivious, he advised the newly wed Biruté Galdikas to get a clitoridectomy before she journeyed with her husband to Borneo in 1971 to study wild orangutans. She'd then be uninterested in sex, her aging mentor reasoned, and thus unlikely to get pregnant and abandon her research.

Jahme considers in panoramic detail the burgeoning of female primatologists in the past forty years, surveying the lives and work of Goodall, Galdikas, Dian Fossey, and scads of others. Never sentimental, she insightfully intertwines the personal with the professional. These



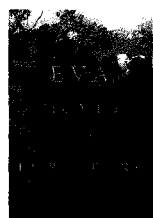
BEAUTY AND
THE BEASTS:
WOMAN,
APE AND
EVOLUTION

by Carole Jahme

Soho Press,
416 pages, \$25.00

women's outré sacrifices would seem to rival their scientific accomplishments. Caldikas, for instance, rescued and rehabilitated orphan orangutans in Kalimantan. The first, Sugito, slept with her each night and drenched her with his urine, "his strong fingers gouging her skin." The author's feminist perspective is less ironically detached (and less enriching) than was Donna Haraway's in *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (1989). Also, she is annoyingly chary of footnotes. Still, Jahme, an English primatologist, reveals much that is fascinating, from the controversial theories of Sarah Blaffer Hrdy on the evolutionary significance of the female orgasm, based on her study of langur monkeys, to Sue Savage-Rumbaugh's research on the linguistic talents of chimpanzees and bonobos. According to Jahme, 90 percent of primate sanctuaries are now supervised by women, and the listings in the *World Directory of Primatologists* are 62 percent female. She shows us how Leakey and his women disciples are, in a way, a self-designated and self-generating species—one formed by a man as well as by "his" feminists. —MOLLY MCQUADE

In most ways Eva McEwen, the protagonist of this perfectly structured novel, is strikingly normal. Born in 1920 in a country town in Scotland, she is raised in a happy household, enjoys the usual attachments and suffers the usual loneliness, learns nursing during World War II, gains and loses love, marries and has a daughter of her own. But owing to her mother's death just after Eva was born, there is in Eva's mind "confusion between two categories commonly held to be opposites: the living and the dead." Like living friends, her ghostly companions, a woman and a little girl, are sometimes selfish and inconvenient, but though at one point it costs her a great deal to hold on to them, she cannot bring herself to let them go, and ultimately they repay her loyalty in spades.



EVA MOVES THE FURNITURE

by Margot Livesey

Henry Holt, 223 pages, \$23.00

Margot Livesey is a disciplined writer. In prose direct and precise she limns Eva's story with steady authority. Because her tone is warm but never overwrought, events that might make her conclusion sentimental are at once intensely sad and comforting. Love and friendship continue, this book suggests, well beyond the grave. —CHRISTINA SCHWARZ

The Princeton political economist Robert Gilpin has written an important book for both academics and a general audience interested in (and these days who isn't?) international economic affairs and "globalization." Although he eschews polemics and writes in a low-key, analytical style, his forceful points serve as a needed antidote to Thomas Friedman's *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* and other facile works about the subject. As Gilpin points out, the struggle between markets and states is nothing new in international politics. In contrast to neoclassical liberal economists (in the United States there seems to be no other kind), who view markets as autonomous and self-regulating, he shows that markets are deeply embedded in larger political and social structures. Gilpin corrects Friedman's breathless, unreflective claims that globalization is inexorable, and the arguments of others that globalization is leading to the retreat of the nation-state. He shows, rather, that the notion that globalization has deprived states of their autonomy in economic policymaking is vastly overdrawn—big states today have much more control over their economic affairs than they did in the decades before World War I.

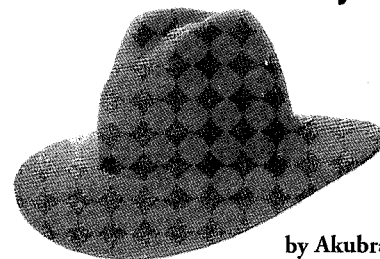
Indeed, the phenomenon of globalization is simultaneously overhyped and misinterpreted. Overhyped because by most measures the international economy was more "globalized" pre-1914 than it is today. Misinterpreted because the real trend in today's international economy is not globalization but the formation of regional trade blocs like



GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

by Robert Gilpin
Princeton University Press, 416 pages, \$59.50/\$18.95

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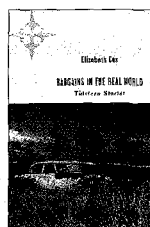
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the European Union and NAFTA. These blocs reflect the ways in which states seek to pursue their national interests in order to enhance their relative power in the international system. The EU exists because the powers of Europe realized that they could compete more effectively in, and exercise more control over, the international economy collectively than separately. NAFTA is in part America's power-driven response to the EU grouping.

In this as in his previous works, Gilpin reminds us that the great powers make the rules for the international economy, and the struggle for wealth is an integral part of their ongoing competition for power. Like the one previous era of international economic openness—the mid-nineteenth-century Pax Britannica—today's era of globalization reflects not the triumph of the autonomous market but the fact of geopolitical hegemony, in this case America's. Economists may cling to the logic of markets, but the real world is shaped by the logic of state power. —CHRISTOPHER LAYNE

The thirteen stories in Elizabeth Cox's new collection memorably capture those moments when quiet lives are changed forever by sudden acts of violence or catastrophe. Set mostly in rural Tennessee, these stories pulse with car crashes, gunshots, tornadoes, and self-slaughter—cataclysms that strand characters in a no-man's-land between the hard circumstances of their present lives and the dizzying possibilities of an unexpected future. Time and again these emotional refugees are forced to grapple with a reality for which they never bargained.

Cox's harsh vision is all the more effective for being conveyed by a disarmingly genteel prose. She is at her best when depicting how characters come to recognize that their lives are gradually slipping beyond their control: "Harold didn't think things had changed all that much, but he



**BARGAINS
IN THE REAL
WORLD**

by Elizabeth Cox
Random House,
240 pages, \$19.95

remembered when Nadine had seemed soft. Her softness had unraveled with the years, and he felt left with just a thin wire of who she was." Occasionally Cox's writing loses its edge by covering too familiar territory, most notably the philandering revivalist preacher in "Biology," whose actions could be predicted by any attentive reader of southern fiction. But such lapses are rare in a collection that manages to map that elusive territory where devastation and hope miraculously intersect. —STEPHEN AMIDON

Salman Rushdie's newest novel is surprisingly slim, in contrast to his usual flatulent, overweight tomes. If we didn't know better, we might be tempted to think that he is narrowing his sights—that the literary machismo of recent efforts such as *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), and *The Satanic Verses* (1988) has mellowed into a more controlled style of fiction. The first few chapters of *Fury* would seem to confirm this impression: Rushdie, the cosmopolitan Asian, has momentarily strayed onto the alien turf of Roth, Bellow, and Updike.

The narrator is fifty-five-year-old Malik Solanka, an Indian professor of philosophy turned high-concept doll maker and, eventually, Web designer. Propelled by mysterious feelings of rage against his beloved wife and son, he has fled his comfortable London life to seek refuge in New York. The dandyish Solanka—part Mr. Sammler and part Humbert Humbert, with a dose of Moses Herzog's objectless disgruntlement thrown in—observes the imperial excess of boomtown Manhattan with precision: "The city boiled with money ... New restaurants opened every hour. Stores, dealerships, galleries struggled to satisfy the skyrocketing demand for ever more *recherché* produce: limited-edition olive oils, three-hundred-dollar corkscrews, customized Humvees ... featherlight shawls made from the chin-



FURY

by Salman
Rushdie
Random House,
272 pages, \$24.95

fluff of extinct mountain goats ... America insulted the rest of the planet."

Rushdie lives, as the saying goes, in interesting times, and he has all the mental equipment necessary for skewering contemporary vanities and fears. But the book's promising beginning is soon drowned out by more typically Rushdian overkill: the cacophony of voices, plots, opinions, allegory, puns, magic realism, multicultural mythology, historical clues, and pop-culture references he has never attempted to edit. He cannot trust the story he is telling to hold its own. The point, for him, is not the tale he tells but the sound of his own raucous and frequently hysterical voice raised in its telling.

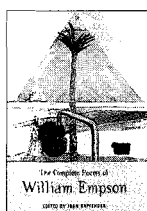
Rushdie's theme is fury: "Life is fury ... Fury—sexual, Oedipal, political, magical, brutal—drives us to our finest heights and coarsest depths." He has chosen an appropriate setting in the overheated, overcharged city of New York, which anesthetizes its fury with material excess while various remote Balkan and Third World countries explode into localized furies of their own. But Rushdie can never resist trying to ennoble his fiction with mythic pretensions, and here what might have been a strong story—even a rather honest one, given the surface similarities between Rushdie and his hero—is altered to fit his chosen myth: the story of the Eumenides, the Furies. These ladies are given earthly shape in the persons of Malik's perfect but (let's face it) used-up and middle-aged wife, Eleanor, and his two New York babes, the Serbian Mila and the Indian Neela. (Get it? Malik, Mila, Neela—that old Rushdian linguistic playfulness, by now a little shopworn.)

Neela in particular is pure wet dream, and the pudgy Solanka's possession of her is one of the sillier episodes in this mostly very silly book. Although Rushdie poses as a sharp political realist, and occasionally—as in *Midnight's Children* (1980) and *Shame* (1983)—even fulfills that role, when it comes to the personal he is the complete romantic: the experience of fifty-four years and three marriages notwithstanding, he still seems to think

that somewhere out there is a perfect woman for every man, perfectly beautiful, whose love will set him free. "*Furia* could be ecstasy, too, and Neela's love was the philosopher's stone that made possible the transmuting alchemy." (This, by the way, is all very fine for the famous, hip Solanka and his famous, hip creator, who don't have to rely on their *beaux yeux*, but most sedentary fifty-something intellectuals find it rather more difficult to lure nubile beauties into their beds.)

In a craven bow to modern bathos, Rushdie finally exposes the source of his hero's angst: Solanka turns out—surprise, surprise!—to have been a victim of childhood sexual abuse. This revelation, and Solanka's "working through" of his problems, bring the novel to an unconvincing denouement. In the end *Fury* is not so much a literary exploration of the forms and varieties of *furia* as it is a pandering to contemporary mores disguised as a critique of them, and a graceless rant against incipient old age. —BROOKE ALLEN

Among the few who think about such things, William Empson (1906–1984) is generally regarded as the greatest English literary critic of the twentieth century. Some might add "alas," for in his later years Empson could be controversial, not to say eccentric: he was convinced that John Donne's love poems covertly dealt with space travel; that Leopold Bloom invited Stephen Dedalus to sleep with his wife, Molly; and that the Christian God was a monster of cruelty deserving repudiation, not reverence. Still, there's no denying the overwhelming impact on literary studies of Empson's cheeky first book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), published when he was only twenty-four. Even now it remains the best introduction to close reading, that subtle art of staying alert to



THE
COMPLETE
POEMS OF
WILLIAM
EMPSON

edited by John
Haffenden

University Press of
Florida, 504 pages,
\$39.95

all the nuances in a poem or meanings on a page. The author of *Seven Types*—and of *Some Versions of Pastoral Words* (1935) and *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951)—really was one of those, to adapt Henry James's phrase, on whom nothing was lost. Yet Empson was rather more than a critic; in fact, he may ultimately be remembered primarily for his strange and melancholy poetry, lines of which can be as haunting as any in Philip Larkin or early Robert Lowell: "Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills./ The waste remains, the waste remains and kills" and "Not but they die, the teasers and the dreams." With his mathematically trained mind and flair for metaphysical conceits (worked up from contemporary physics and biology), Empson produced verse that was dense, argumentative, and at times dizzyingly obscure. Aware of this, he obligingly composed notes—some lengthy—to *Poems* (1935) and *The Gathering Storm* (1940), explaining the "odd bit of information" and any "incidental difficulties" in, say, "Arachne," "To an Old Lady," or "Missing Dates."

This book—the most sumptuous and attractive, and also the most painstaking and scholarly, edition any modern poet ever dreamed of—surrounds a mere hundred pages of verse with 400 pages of introduction and factual commentary. John Haffenden, Empson's biographer, knows everything about Empson, writes crisply himself, and cites letters, manuscripts, interviews, scientific studies, even record liner notes; he clarifies as much as possible the arcane matter that has been compacted into a poetry far more personal—and agonized—than it looks. To read Empson in this edition thus becomes a double pleasure: one has not only all of his seventy-five or so poems (most only a page long) but also the data to understand them. As Donne wrote, "dark texts need notes," and Haffenden illuminates Empson's brilliantly. "Imagine, then, by miracle, with me, / (Ambiguous gifts, as what gods give must be) / What could not possibly be there, / And learn a style from a despair." —MICHAEL DIRDA

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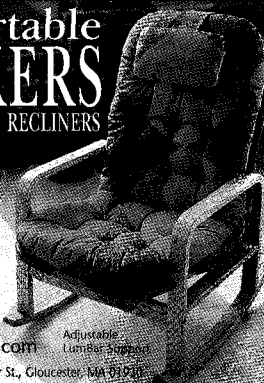
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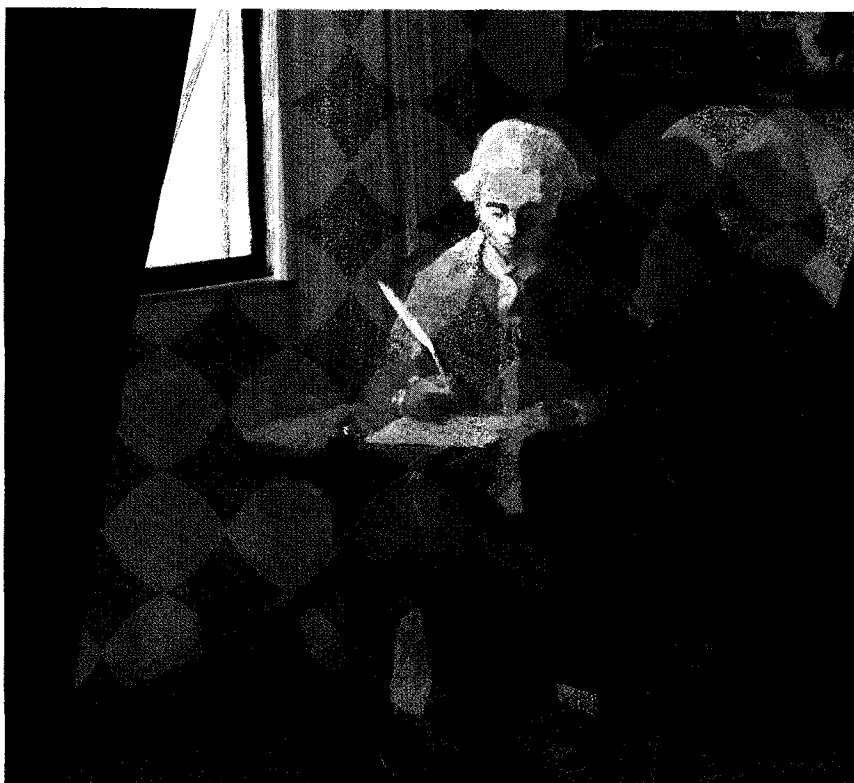
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BOOKS

BOZZY'S LIFE

A dazzling portrait of James Boswell as a literary artist

BY MIRANDA SEYMOUR

.....

James Boswell was the son of a hard-headed Scottish laird and his grimly religious wife. He did not have a happy childhood, and although he never lost his passion for the hills of Auchinleck (the family pronounced the name of their 20,000-acre estate *Affleck*), the call of London was strong. As a student—willingly in Edinburgh, miserably in Glasgow, where his father dispatched him in order to curb his passion for the theater (Glasgow had none)—he wrote terrible verse and an opera with a pointed title: *Give Your Son His Will*. He also supped and rollicked with a convivial group of young men. In these latter pursuits Boswell played something of the fool. But the philosopher lived in him too. His love of knowledge and literature won him the friendship of such Scottish intellectuals as David Hume and Hugh Blair (of *Blair's Sermons*).

Boswell was twenty-two when he

moved to London, in 1762. The journal he then began in earnest shows not only how quickly he found his energetic and immediate style but also how futile his father's attempts at restraint had proved. Boswell found sex

(it would be interesting to know more about his father's extra-marital career) a drug of which he could not get enough, no matter what the consequences. The fool sought women, catch-

ing—and doubtless transmitting—venereal diseases more times than even the most devoted biographer would want to count. The philosopher had set his heart on meeting Samuel Johnson, who to an important extent became a substitute for Boswell's unsatisfactory father.

The desired encounter took place by accident in May of the following year, in the bookshop of a mutual friend, Thomas Davies. Boswell's entreaties that Dr. Johnson should not be told he was a

Scot (Johnson famously despised Scots) were ignored; Johnson, while forgiving of Boswell's origins ("Sir, that, I find, is what a very great many of your countrymen cannot help"), was displeased to be lectured on the merits of his old friend the actor David Garrick. ("I have known David Garrick longer than you have done: and I know no right you have to talk to me on the subject.")

Boswell was undeterred; Boswell was never deterred. Within weeks he had confided his life story to his new friend, had received a promise that Johnson would "take charge" of him, and had been encouraged in his habit of keeping a "fair and undisguised" journal. Best of all, perhaps, because Boswell was as eager as a puppy for love, he had been offered unconditional affection. Johnson had taken him "cordially by the hand" after a prolonged evening of conversation, Boswell proudly informed a former father-figure, Sir David Dalrymple. Johnson declared, according to Boswell, "My dear Boswell, I love you very much." Boswell then asked Dalrymple, "Can I help being somewhat vain?" It had, he added more soberly, meant much to him to win the friendship of a man whose effect on him was so beneficial: "I think better of myself when in his company than at any other time."

The friendship was not always so unruffled. "You have but two topics, yourself and me, and I'm sick of both," Johnson complained to his devoted recorder in 1776. Boswell stored the remark for future use. Being rebuked and mocked was a price he was willing to pay for a friendship that had become one of the few reliable strands in an unhappy and increasingly dissolute life. He was not Johnson's only friend, of course; it must sometimes have been painfully apparent that Johnson enjoyed the company of the Thrales and of mischievous Topham Beauclerk at least as much as his own.

Johnson could live without Boswell; some of his merriest moments took place without him, such as (when he was nearly fifty) daring a friend to climb over the wall into an Oxford college (the friend declined) and, on another occasion, beating a spirited teenage girl in a race across a lawn. He was often wittier in company other than Boswell's. He

BOSWELL'S PRESUMPTUOUS TASK

by Adam Sisman

Farrar, Straus and Giroux
351 pages, \$25.00

never showed any impulse to defer to the younger man. His will failed to mention Boswell; we must take Boswell's word for it that Johnson approved of this "presumptuous task"—the famous description of the *Life of Johnson* that Boswell gave in his preface to it.

By 1825, only forty-one years after Johnson died, his writings were out of print. They remained so for another hundred years, while Boswell's account of Johnson's life went through forty-one English editions in the nineteenth century. Thomas Macaulay's 1831 review did no harm: although Macaulay dismissed Boswell himself as "a man of the meanest and feeblest intellect," he used parallels with Eclipse, a celebrated racehorse, to assert plainly that Boswell was "the first of biographers ... Eclipse is first, and the rest nowhere."

Today Boswell's *Life* is still loved, esteemed, and discussed. We can look for its antecedents and find the same agreeably chatty tone in earlier writers—Vasari and John Aubrey come to mind. There was, however, no precedent for the writing of a biography in the naturalistic genre, as a Flemish portrait (thus did Boswell describe his work) that interwove life, letters, and a direct, conversational approach to achieve an extraordinary impression of spontaneity. This is what makes Boswell's *Life* continue to seem so modern, whereas Johnson's works seem irrecoverably stranded in their time.

Boswell's *Life* is more familiar to us than the man who wrote it. (This is partly because most of Boswell's letters and manuscripts were unearthed only in the past eighty years.) Frederick A. Pottle and later Frank Brady each produced a scholarly and entertaining volume that drew on this treasure trove; there has been little else. For an enthusiastic and intelligent biographer, then, Boswell was an ideal candidate: intriguing, quotable, and—always helpful—a possessor of many famous friends. It would be hard to find anybody who, as Johnson once remarked, did not have some connection, real or imaginary, to at least one celebrated person; but few have hunted down notable figures with such conspicuous success as Boswell. In addition to Johnson we can

place not only Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau, Edmund Burke, and David Garrick but also Margaret Caroline Rudd, a notorious forger and confidence trickster with whom Boswell, to the disgust of his wife's friends, had a tormented affair. Boswell's life is unusual in illuminating not only the underworld of the prostitutes among whom he spent an impressive proportion of his time but also the heavy, static society of the Scottish aristocracy and the fiercely loquacious world of London's "clubbable" men.

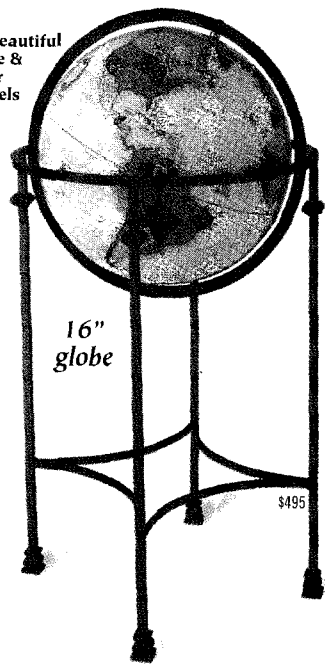
Peter Martin's fine biography, published in the United States last year, is racy, detailed, and lively, and his particular area of interest is the nature and effect of his subject's depression. The *Life*, Martin proposes, was written as an extended act of self-healing, as Boswell's method of dealing with his own secret devils. His ubiquitous and talkative presence in the book can, Martin tells us, be read as fulfilling the biographer's need "to define his indefinable self, in the archetypal pattern of a Romantic egotist."

Sisman offers a more persuasive and less dramatic interpretation of Boswell and his literary achievement. Where Martin follows Boswell from birth to death, Sisman focuses on the twenty-year friendship that formed the basis for Boswell's *Life* and on the unhappy years during which he worked on the biography (it was published in 1791, seven years after Johnson's death). In Sisman's tighter focus Boswell seems less a complex and driven character and more a literary artist.

Sisman has no time for the idea that Boswell put himself into the *Life* as a way of dealing with his own troubled state of mind. His reasons for Boswell's ubiquitous presence in the book are more intriguingly devious; plausibly sustained, they show Boswell as a skilled manipulator of the truth. Sisman's approach is attractive and stimulating to anybody interested in the ethics of biography writing. If we acknowledge that Boswell was a master of literary technique rather than a precise recorder of facts, can we still allow his portrait of Johnson to be authentic? Or is it better to approach the *Life* as a web of half-truths? Sisman does not answer these questions; he does make his readers aware of the need to give them serious consideration.

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Boswell was not alone in feeling that he had a special claim on writing about Johnson. But he did have one striking advantage over his rivals: the journals and notebooks in which he had recorded Johnson's conversations, monologues, and observations. The difficulty that faced him was how best to make use of them. How could he most easily animate these dusty recollections while ensuring that their authenticity was not questioned? The answer he found was to put himself at the center of events. Because Boswell is always present, chatting, smiling, inquiring, we are easily led to believe that these comments were indeed made. And if, led by Sisman, we start to look at the *Life* under a microscope, we soon notice how often Boswell slipped in some tribute by a friend or acquaintance, or even by Johnson, to his remarkable memory and powers of observation. "O that his words were written in a book," exclaims a Mr. Cradock, just after Boswell has modestly regretted his inadequate representation of Johnson in full flow. Mr. Cradock is not the only person to voice this wish in a book that neatly answers that need. It is a deft trick, and an effective one.

Boswell's presence gives the *Life* its extraordinary verisimilitude. We, too, seem to be rolling jerkily along in a coach to Bath or Bridport as Johnson leans forward to address his friend. When we hear Johnson and Topham Beauclerk teasing Boswell about his ancestry and then relenting ("You are an exception, though," Johnson declared. "Come, gentlemen, let us candidly admit that there is one Scotchman who is cheerful"), we are there beside them. The possibility that the words are of Boswell's contriving never occurs to us—but Johnson and Beauclerk were dead when he wrote them. How do we know that his memory was always precise? We don't—but the scene seems so authentic that we accept the conversation as real. This illusion of reality is in some ways Boswell's greatest achievement. The *Life* opens a door into a room filled with spirited and argumentative people with whom we are instantly at home, not least because our friend the biographer stands among them, buoyant and at ease.

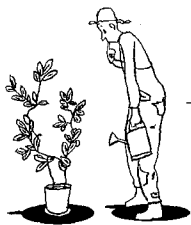
So Boswell is in the book to validate it and add authenticity. But Sisman proposes that we also notice his performance of a more selfless task. Johnson had insisted that any biography written by a friend should show the faults as clearly as the virtues; to achieve this end Boswell was willing to sacrifice himself. Again and again in the *Life* we find the biographer playing the fool to provoke Johnson into a not always agreeable candor. All pious dismay and disapproval, Boswell nudges Johnson into declaring that a man's appetite for a good meal should never be affected by the just hanging of a friend. On another occasion Boswell brightly comments that the best way to hurry a friend out of town before he loses all his money is for his companions to pick quarrels with him. "Nay, Sir, we'll send *you* to him," Johnson answers. "If your company does not drive a man out of his house, nothing will." Asked to explain himself, Johnson admits that he lost his temper over Boswell's defense of Americans earlier in the conversation (Johnson detested Americans) and took the first opportunity to strike back. "This," Boswell cheerfully adds, "was a candid and pleasant confession." We forget how neatly he contrived it.

The contrivances are what interest Sisman most. Natural and authentic though the biography of Johnson seems to the reader, it is a work of considerable artifice. To begin with, Boswell had to create the impression of a steady companionship, given that he had spent only about 400 days with Johnson over a period of just over twenty years. The illusion was greatly assisted, as Sisman points out, by Boswell's observation of minute detail. The precise descriptions of Johnson's appearance, manner, and tone of voice that are scattered throughout the *Life* convey the impression of a gentle passage of time being recorded at close quarters. Boswell's acknowledgment in 1779 of his failure to keep a regular account of Johnson's conversations that year leads the reader to understand this omission to have been exceptional. But this is misleading: there were other years during which Boswell had little or no contact with his mentor.

It was, Boswell insisted, an honest portrait. Sisman's microscope shows that

it was not. For example, the *Life* emphasizes Johnson's devotion to his wife and protects him from any misunderstanding of his relationship with Anna Williams, the blind poetess of whom he took care for many years. It does not disclose that a year after Mrs. Johnson's death, in 1752, her husband contemplated marrying again. Why did Boswell not make use of this? Sisman argues that the idea of a second marriage was inconsistent with Boswell's conception of Johnson's character, so he decided to omit it. "I had now resolved *Life* into my own feelings," Sisman quotes him as saying in 1789. For Sisman, this is an important statement. Summarizing Boswell's achievement and the reasons for his omissions and reworkings of the evidence, Sisman offers this analysis: "To understand the experience of another, we must relate it to our own. Boswell's Johnson is a heroic expression of Boswell himself."

A book that concentrates so intently on the making of Johnson's biography sometimes leaves the reader feeling shortchanged about the details of Boswell's own life. Sisman writes with great wit and elegance about the social background (he is exceptionally sharp on the subtle shifts in England's attitude toward Scotland during Boswell's lifetime), and he is as alert as Martin to Boswell's gaffes as a courtier. Martin's hilarious account of Boswell's attempting to impress the King of Prussia by wearing a fetching Scottish bonnet is matched, deliciously, by Sisman's description of Boswell's announcing his connection to the Scottish royal line to the Hanoverian George III, who was distinctly unamused. But it is difficult not to wish for more information about Boswell's early life, prior to his friendship with Johnson. Sisman could also have told us more about the pitiful and extraordinary relationship Boswell had with his wife. Martin reminds us that Boswell used her as his confessor, and that on one bizarre occasion he took her with him when he went hunting for whores in Edinburgh. Moments like this offer revealing glimpses of a darker, demon-ridden side to James Boswell's nature that can't be detected in Sisman's sparkling, companionable, and intelligent account. ▀



THE PUZZLER

by EMILY COX and HENRY RATHVON

Half and Half

Ten of this puzzle's clues will be found to give only partial cryptic instructions along with normal definitions. In each case half of the answer is cryptically indicated in the clue and half is to be entered in the grid. Numbers in parentheses after these clues indicate the lengths of grid entries only. Successful solvers may be rewarded with 19 Across. Nine answers are capitalized.

Last month's Puzzler solution is on page 125.

ACROSS

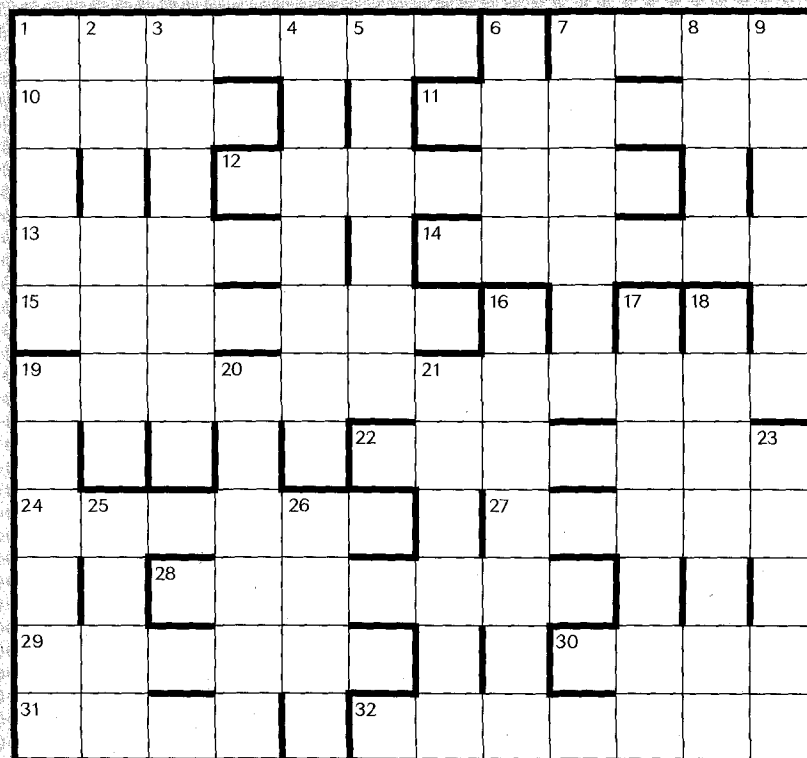
1. Cryptic cross is cut (7)
7. Come again with small secret (4)
10. Territory's capital project primarily past (4)
11. For the most part, stumble through minor details (6)
12. Fast vehicle with black scarf tied on the front (3,4)
13. Granular snow right in fictional land (5)
14. Reviewed, e.g., auto failure (6)
15. Part of a passage is penned by alien poet (7)
22. Homer gains victory at little cost (7)
24. Take \$100 by error in breaking pact (6)
27. Heart broken at first by a cheer (5)
28. Timeless ties help ancient city (7)
29. Betrayed Mafia boss after fortune turned (4,2)
30. Noble cut short ahead of time (4)
31. Entertains heartless celebrities (4)
32. Pointer Sisters' initial South American show biz name (7)

DOWN

1. Second-long resolution (5)
2. Spin back to fabled place (7)
3. "Big Five" cup presented without introductions for uncle (1,4,2)
4. Steps outside hospital area free of germs (7)
5. Dull orange heating unit with selenium (6)
6. Four turns in decorative trimmings (4)
7. Opening greeting in our direction? (6)
8. Prison rat (4)
9. Wear nothing in asylum (4,2)
16. Sticker covering popular small-time gambler (7)

17. Picaresque hero's outrageous gas bill (3,4)
18. Playing bores, go nuts (7)
19. Poverty resulting from poor soil (6)
20. Crooks keeping large mongrels (6)
21. That is to say, southern Louisiana hunting dog (6)
23. Build a barricade around a Northwestern town (5)
25. Train with group of swimmers between terminals (4)
26. Dismiss band on the rebound (4)

Note: The instructions above are for this month's puzzle only. It is assumed that you know how to decipher clues. For a complete introduction to clue-solving send an addressed, stamped long envelope to The Atlantic Puzzler, 77 North Washington Street, Boston, Mass. 02114.



The Atlantic Monthly (ISSN 0276-9077) is published monthly except for a combined issue in July/August by The Atlantic Monthly Group, 77 N. Washington St., Boston, MA 02114 (617-854-7700). Periodicals postage paid at Boston, MA, Toronto, Ont., and additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Subscription queries: Atlantic Customer Care, Box 37585, Boone, IA 50037-0585 (or call 800-234-2411). Privacy: We make portions of our customer list available to carefully screened companies that offer products and services we believe you may enjoy. If you do not want to receive this information, please write to the Customer Care address above. Advertising and Circulation: 200 Madison Ave., 20th floor, NY, NY 10016 (646-695-8500). Subscriptions: one year \$19.95 in the U.S. and poss.; add \$8.00 in Canada, includes GST (123209926); add \$15.00 elsewhere. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement 0261327. Back issues: send \$7.50 per copy to The Atlantic, Back Issues, 1900 Industrial Park Dr., Federalsburg, MD 21632 (or call 410-754-8219). Vol. 288, No. 3, September 2001. Copyright © 2001, by The Atlantic Monthly Group. All rights reserved. Postmaster: Send address changes to Atlantic Address Change, Box 37585, Boone, IA 50037-0585.



WORD COURT

by BARBARA WALLRAFF

J. P. MCCULLOUGH, of Darien Center, New York, writes, "In the sense of 'unclothed,' *Webster's 10th Collegiate* shows *nuder* as an adjective: *nude*, *nuder*, *nudest*. How can one person be *nuder* than another? Either you are so or you are not. Will you please clarify?"

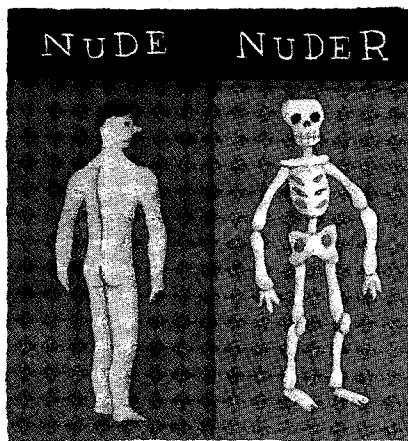
The *Oxford English Dictionary* doesn't specify in its entries for adjectives whether they may be "inflected" (made comparative and superlative using *-er* and *-est*), but surely there's a lesson in the fact that nowhere in the 60 million words of text of the *OED Online* does *nuder* or *nudest* appear. The *OED* does, after all, yield several instances apiece of the adjectives *wronger* and *wrongest*, even if some other reference books state or imply that these forms are, well, wrong.

Then again, a search of a recent year's worth of the publications catalogued in a major online database turned up three *nuders*, three *nudests* (not counting mentions of a Dr. Nuder, a mistaken reference to a "nudest resort," and so on), and five *more nudes* or *most nudes*. Here's an example, from *OC Weekly*, an Orange County, California, newspaper: "People are *nuder* in other places than they are here. I was walking in a park in Berlin once when I saw a man in his 60s sunning himself sublimely on the grass. Was he nude? Yes, he was!" And here's another, from *Harper's Bazaar*, in which the actress Sarah Jessica Parker is talking about a photo session for that magazine: "It was the *most nude* I have ever felt in my life." Evidently not everyone agrees that a person either is *nude* or is not.

That some people don't perceive nudity as an all-or-nothing proposition is further borne out by such frequently heard phrases as *totally nude* and *completely nude*—though those of us who are particular about our language tend to consider these phrases redundant

and wrong. Nonetheless, *stark-naked* and *buck-naked* are perfectly acceptable folksy expressions, and they may be thought of as collateral evidence here.

My belief is that the failure to perceive *nude* as meaning something complete and logically uninflectable is one aspect of a widespread prejudice against small words: people don't always trust them to do their jobs. Besides *nuder* and *totally nude*, they say things like *ATM machine*, *armed gunman*, *free gift*, *visual image*, *mix together*, *future plans*, *general public*, and *very unique*, when *ATM*, *gunman*, *gift*, *image*, *mix*, *plans*, *public*, and *unique* would have worked just as hard for them—and done the job right.



PAM SHOEMAKER, of New York, New York, writes: "Should not the word *culinary* be pronounced 'kyoo-li-nary'—with a long *u*? This is what my dictionary says and how I have always pronounced it, but for quite a while now I have been hearing everybody on the radio and TV cooking shows pronouncing it 'kull-i-nary.' At first I thought it was just a few mistaken people, but now it seems ubiquitous."

The unabridged *Webster's Third*, published in 1961, preferred "kullinary," and *WIII* was firm in its intention to describe contemporary language, rather

than prescribe how words ought to be used and pronounced—so the short *u* isn't something foisted on us by today's trendy foodies. More-prescriptive dictionaries, such as the *American Heritage*, still tend to prefer "kyoolinary," but there's no consensus. How nice. For once, everybody is right.

BERNARD WEISSMAN, of Los Angeles, California, writes: "Will you do battle with a usage error already deeply rooted in our dictionaries? I refer to the expression *pull oneself up by one's bootstraps*, generally defined as 'to help oneself without the aid of others; use one's resources.' This is flat wrong. Visualize the action. The pull exerted upward by one's hands is *precisely equal* to the pull exerted downward by one's feet. It is a Buster Keaton skit—a comical demonstration not of self-reliance but of stupidity. The phrase belongs not with examples of virtuous effort but with examples of futility, like trying to catch the wind in a net or trying to get blood out of a turnip."

Now that you've mentioned it, I'll never again be able to hear this expression in the same way. And yet most people, including such writers as James Joyce and Doris Lessing, use it to mean what the dictionary says it does. Probably the expression would mean what you wish it did if its origin were in physics terminology, rather than in literature. But did you know that it is the basis for the computer term *boot*? As early computer engineers saw it, when the instructions that were loaded first into the machine told it what instructions to load next, even a computer was able to pull itself up by its "bootstraps."

Do you have a language question or dispute? Write to Word Court in care of The Atlantic Monthly, 77 North Washington Street, Boston, MA 02114, or send e-mail to MsGrammar@theatlantic.com. All letters become the property of Word Court. Ms. Grammar is also on the Web, at www.theatlantic.com/courtrecord.

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